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Mara Lee Grayson

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Three Poems

Mara Lee Grayson

Reflection: On the Significance of Writer Friends

Over the last two years, as legislation and sociopolitical white supremacist bullshit have decimated antiracist curricula and other efforts toward educational equity, as I've been disappointed by supposedly progressive universities that don't protect students or employees (see Nguyen), and as colleagues I admire have left the academic workforce, I've been thinking about irony. There's a special irony in how academia allows itself to be weaponized, its faculty and students sacrificed to the status quo. Knowledge production has outpaced institutional progress, and academic institutions continually pull us back to status quo operations that ignore everything we know from the scholarship we produce, everything institutional leaders should have learned in recent years. Students aren't the only ones who suffer when capitalistic, ethnocentric, ableist notions of normality and success are shoved down our throats.

We forget that we are always in a not-exactly-chosen community, for better or worse, with peers and colleagues. Too many of us suffer, if not at the hands of deliberately cruel or self-serving people, then because of the whitely whims and neoliberal motivations of toxic departments and universities that seek to fortify their gates. Like other multiply-marginalized scholars, I've written about experiences with ostracism and discrimination that (not so) coincidentally began when I challenged institutional whiteness (Grayson). I've been subjected to sexist, antisemitic, and ableist attitudes, coded into criticisms of my voice, demeanor, hometown, and politics. I've navigated retaliation, runaround, and betrayal by colleagues I thought were allies. Unsure how to express what I've felt in scholarly discourse – or even sometimes in full sentences – I began writing and publishing poetry again. I also returned to teaching creative writing.

My fall 2022 creative writing class met in a room too small for 25 people during a public health crisis. Wearing masks, students wrote, shared, and revised; I did the same at home. I emphasized expression and connection and encouraged codemeshing. I shared Melissa Febos's celebration of personal essay as social justice work: "The only way to make room is to drag all our stories into that room. That's how it gets bigger" (28). A poet friend from my MFA days gave a reading and we talked about the importance of writer friends to trust with shitty first drafts. Students discussed their experiences with life as well as language: one read a genre-defying reflection upon the loneliness of dorming on a predominantly commuter campus; he added that making a friend in class had been the high point of his semester. Another read a personal essay about being sexually assaulted in high school. Her peers thanked her for trusting them with her story. It felt good to share, she said.

“This was really a life class,” one student told me at the end of the semester. On evaluations, alongside positive comments about my teaching, students critiqued the classroom’s unsuitability as a space for sharing creative writing. They distinguished between my teaching and the institutional context forced upon us and used the evaluation to voice their concerns. Though mistreatment had made me question my role in the institution, I’m not sure I’ve ever felt as successful as an educator.

That success resulted not from particularly brilliant teaching or even an especially brave cohort of student writers but instead from a confluence of factors in that place and time, one of which was the writing we shared. Though all writing may enable writers to retell trauma stories from positions of agency, personal essay and poetry may allow writers to (re)present and reconfigure experiences of trauma, which most human beings have experienced (Boysen). Through poetry, we can put language to the intensity and nonlinearity of our emotions and cognition. Through personal essay, we may (re)claim and find audiences for our stories.

I realize now that what disappoints me isn’t that institutions keep resorting to the status quo. Institutions will institution. What disappoints me is how many colleagues, how many of *us*, not only let it happen, but adjust our behavior accordingly, bolster the institution, and throw each other under the bus. We can learn a lot from our students about supporting each other, not just as scholars but as people. Writing has helped me connect with parts of myself I let lie dormant, and it helped me connect with students during a difficult time in many of our lives. It has reminded me, too, of the importance of writer friends: When we share our language and stories with each other, we offer readers something of ourselves and the world as we live it, whether our language takes the form of poetry, personal essay, or scholarship. Good readers honor that responsibility.

When it comes to scholarship, I’ve taken on as many collaborative writing projects as I have solo-authored ones in recent years. I’ve made new writer friends.

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*The Palm Tree is Not Indigenous to Southern California:
A Poem for Our Colleagues Who Are Too Busy Reading
White Fragility to Actually Do Anything about Racism*

Professor, maybe I don't have the history
to handle all the dissonance I've learned
defines the woman's wonder at the west.

The palm trees missionaries planted
have borne centuries of gossip,
and I'm getting tired of trying

to clarify: Some roots are shallow,
fibrous, herbs we've misidentified;
self-accountability requires growth,

not absolution; and language matters
more to one whose tongue is branded
foreign. Irony is lost to fear

emboldened by fragility, while they teach us
to ignore the inspiration
seeping from the fading sun. Grit grows

wide as hope, but palms still stand
like mysteries of villages
burned up and abandoned long ago:

Yes, germ can be both seed and byproduct.
No wonder now I dream
in meter: Drums beat in my ears

to keep me marching
in the night, while travelers lose track
of what is fiction, what is magic,

and empty out the building,
inviting rumors to proliferate
then occupy each unmade bed.

Migrant butterflies are buried
in the pavement, fossilizing fast
beneath this clusterfuck

of fertilizer and debris
that calls itself a university: Sometimes
I wish it all burnt to the ground,

but what would it become?
Just another plot in which to plant
another stubborn patch of palm trees.

The Director's Daughter

I used to be a method actor, which means
I never lied. I learned to play both parts
of any given dialogue when everyone was busy
being someone else. I was, meanwhile,
aligned with expectations, typecast
as the naïve perpetrator: Eve impaled
by the serpent's fang. Once upon a time,
everybody knew my father. Then,
a cigarette I write into my character, high
school black box smoke alarm deactivated.
An airplane bottle, bourbon in the library
before I get onstage to cry.
Pretending long enough a kiss is real
to make it so. It was a different time,
says one of me; the other's sure it wasn't.
If I hurt you, I believed I wasn't me that time.
Now I'm haunted by my father's face
when I look in the mirror. I saw flashes
of our futures, but how could I predict
their order? A quiet audience won't care
if sea or salt came first or if once we were
inseparable, contents and containers,
and soon will be again. Then the boat adrift:
I was a dreamer in the water,
while you treaded for time. I floated
on a lover's belly, buoyed by his ebb and sigh.
I thought myself to sleep each night,
the performer all alone onstage, yet so

distractable, telling truth but out of turn.
You should have known my head would spin

a story that my mouth refused
to wrap itself around. I'll meet whatever mark

you want, and call myself by any name,
if you'll let my lips make seven words

in shape: I was here, and I hurt too.

Author Bio

Mara Lee Grayson's books include *Teaching Racial Literacy: Reflective Practices for Critical Writing*, *Race Talk in the Age of the Trigger Warning: Recognizing and Challenging Classroom Cultures of Silence*, and *Antisemitism and the White Supremacist Imaginary: Conflations and Contradictions in Composition and Rhetoric*. Her poetry has been nominated for fancy awards but hasn't won any of them. Previously a tenured faculty member, she currently works as the Director of Content Development for the Campus Climate Initiative at Hillel International.