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“ . . . And Her Husband Beat Her Until She Was Bleeding Heavily”: School Texts and Female Oppression in Malawi

by Liz Barber, Marjorie Jenkins, Connie Herman, Alippo Ussi, Lucy Kapenuka, Frank Chikhasu and Reuthers Malembanje

Although it is one of the poorest countries in the world, Malawi promises children universal public access to eight years of primary education (Tietjen, 1995). In the final year, Standard Eight, students take an examination for the Primary School Leaving Certificate of Education. Their scores determine whether or not they get into secondary school. Fewer than 20% do (Maluwa-Banda, 2003), and the ability to read and especially write in English is a key determinant of their success.

Along with ChiChewa, the most widely spoken indigenous language, English is one of the two official national languages of Malawi (Matiki, 2003; Kamwendo, 2002). Instruction in Standards One through Four (U.S. grades one through four) is conducted in ChiChewa, with English taught as a school subject. Instruction beyond Standard Four, however, and all of the crucial selective examinations, are conducted in English. At higher education levels English becomes the key school subject:

If a student excels in all other subjects but fails his English paper, she or he is considered to have failed and cannot get a certificate, let alone advance to the next level of education (Matiki, 2003, p. 206).

As Alfred J. Matiki (2003) notes, this emphasis has produced a situation in which:

Malawians have come to view English as a socially and economically more viable language than Chichewa. Speaking English is equated with being educated. The use of English as a measure of intelligence in the educational system forms the basis for similar use in other spheres of life, such as in employment. [. . .] To many

Malawians economic success is predicated on one's ability to speak, read, and write English. [. . .] While Malawians accept that literacy empowers, they contend that it is only literacy in English that pays. (p. 207)

This article explores how the social situation of girls in Malawi and the gender discourses embedded in their school texts shape their school experiences and access to English, and thus their chances of educational advancement. The paper grows out of a teacher-research effort by two U.S.-based authors, Liz Barber and Connie Herman, at the time both public school teachers in Virginia, and four teachers at Domasi Demonstration Primary School in Domasi, Malawi: then School Head Teacher Alippo Ussi, and Standard Eight teachers Lucy Kapenuka, Reuthers Malembanje, and Frank Chikhasu. The work was supported through a Fulbright collaborative teacher education program partially funded by USAID and run by Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

We begin by providing a brief overview of the educational context in Malawi and the role of English in the educational system, with special attention to the situation of girls. After describing the teaching-inquiry methodology underlying the study, we then examine a particular instance in which representations of gender roles in textbooks intersect in problematic ways with children's efforts to write. Finally, we conclude with questions and reflections on the nature of collaboration and literacy raised by the study.

English, Education, and Gender Roles in Malawi

Although our focus is on the situation of girls, learning English is a problem for both male and female students. The Malawian education system as a whole is under-resourced. The average ratio of students to teachers is roughly 125 to 1, and much higher in rural than urban areas. Few children have schoolbooks, paper, or pens. There are no libraries except at universities and teacher training schools, and staff members remain reluctant to let children and families take books home. Although primary education is in principle extended to all, the costs of books, uniforms, and school materials are high when considered in the Malawian context. School costs are estimated to account for 13% of overall family expenditures among the poorest families. In addition, the income children can generate selling in the markets or through working for pay is needed in families to provide even the most basic level of food and life necessities. Death takes many adults during their parenting years, and heads of households struggle to bring up children of those who have died, in addition to their own. Severe poverty within the country makes it difficult to keep children in school in such situations (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003, p. 506). Further, the quality of the teaching force is low. Many teachers throughout the country teach with only a Standard Eight education and little formal preparation. As [Esme Chipso Kadzamira and Pauline Rose \(2003\)](#) report, these factors have a direct impact on literacy and language learning:

The unequal distribution is particularly detrimental for students from poorer households in rural areas who are often more likely to drop out early. . . . These students, therefore, only experience schooling of extremely poor quality, which would often prevent them from even attaining basic literacy and numeracy skills. . . . Fewer than half of the [Standard Three] children interviewed could read common words in English or Chichewa which appear frequently in textbooks. (p. 511)

Even those who overcome these difficulties and pass through the first examination filter are not

assured of further progress. Students who pass the Standard Eight exams but lack scores high enough to be selected to attend a residential government secondary school (the schools with the better-prepared teachers) can pay tuition to attend a community day school – if one exists near their village – at an expense few families can afford.

Poverty and inequality are legacies of Malawi's colonial history and post-colonial economic policies, and extend far beyond the educational system. Dependence on wood as a primary energy source has led to rapid deforestation, ecological degradation, and a drastic reduction in farmable lands in a country where most families survive on subsistence farming. In years without sufficient rain, famine occurs, its impact compounded by economic policies that support the continued export of food even in such conditions ([Chinsinga, 2002](#)). Life expectancy was 37 years at the time of this research, and more than one child in ten (ages birth through fourteen) currently tests positive for HIV/AIDS ([Bergman & Kreis, 2005](#); [Forster, 2001](#); [Kaspin, 1990](#); [Lwanda, 2003](#); [Mtika, 2001](#)).

Females are further disadvantaged within this system by property laws (e.g., the Registered Land Act) which give land titles to “heads of households,” a term which in practice almost exclusively refers to men ([Kanyongolo, 2004](#)). Thus women rarely are able to own land themselves. Customary inheritance practices in Malawi can leave a widow ostracized from her village and her late husband's property, household belongings and lands.

This subordinate status is extended to school-aged girls, who are commonly expected to stay home from school to do chores or attend to sick relatives or small children:

Although children might initially enroll in school, they might be withdrawn from school because their labour is needed by the household. . . . Children, particularly girls, may be needed to substitute for the domestic work of adults in the household to allow them to undertake income-generative activities. This has become more severe in the context of HIV/AIDS which often means that girls are required to look after sick

relatives, and take on the roles of childcare and other domestic chores following the death of a parent. (Kadzamira & Rose, 2003, p. 507; Forster, 2001)

Schools themselves can be alienating and even dangerous for girls. Except in the most enlightened settings, girls are required to do all school cleaning (in Malawi children clean the schools and school grounds one morning each week before classes begin), including cleaning of latrines. Bathroom facilities (open hole latrines) lack the privacy and sanitary supplies needed by maturing girls. Females who must walk five kilometers from home – a typical distance separating a village from a public school – are at risk of rape. Thus “parents are even reluctant to send young girls to distant schools to prevent them from being molested” (Maluwa-Banda, 2003, p. 18; cf. Nampota & Wasili, 2000). Even inside schools, girls are not always safe:

A recent study on Improving Girls Education in Under-Resourced Community Day Secondary Schools (CDSSs) revealed that sexual abuse was one of the most pertinent problems girls were facing. The main perpetrators ranged from male teachers, male students to members of the community . . . In some CDSSs up to half of the male teachers were reported to have had sexual relations with their school-girls in exchange for better grades or extra tuition. (Maluwa-Banda, 2003, p. 19)

Given these constraints, many girls are pushed out of the system long before the Standard Eight exams: while they account for 49% of enrollments in Standard One, they make up only 39% of Standard Eight enrollments (Swainson, 2000, p. 51).

By focusing on gender representations in school texts and access to English, we do not suggest that these are the causes of girls’ school difficulties, or that remedying them will somehow alter the constraints on girls’ experiences in education and everyday life. We do, however, suggest that school literacy practices are powerful mechanisms by means of which relations of inequality are translated into educational terms and normalized as legitimate, taken-for-granted features of

everyday life, and limit not only school advancement but possibilities for “conscientization” (Freire, 1985), mobilization, and social action.

Methods: Hybridizing Instruction and Inquiry

Our approach to studying these issues is a form of teacher-inquiry that combines methods traditionally used for research (e.g., image elicitation) with inquiry-oriented teaching methods (e.g., writing workshop). The line between instruction and inquiry, between pedagogical methods and research methods, can be very thin. As Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Kelly Donnell (2006) put it, “the boundaries between inquiry and practice blur when the practitioner is a researcher and when the professional context is a site for the study of problems of practice” (p. 609). These blurred boundaries can be especially difficult to negotiate when the study spans cultures and continents.

The school in Domasi where this work unfolded was located near a small, rural village which at the time had limited internet connectivity and only difficult and prohibitively expensive phone links. Thus prior to arriving in Malawi, Liz, a fifth grade teacher, and Connie, an eighth grade teacher, were unable to effectively communicate with the Standard Eight classroom teachers Reuthers (who taught English and reading), Lucy (who taught agriculture and homemaking), and Frank (who taught math, science, history and geography). Liz and Connie therefore designed a tentative instructional-inquiry event, with the expectation that it could later be collaboratively modified with their Malawian colleagues.

This initial plan was to combine student inquiry and reflection on their environment and community, with writing practice in English. Children would take photographs of their community surroundings with disposable cameras that Liz and Connie provided. The teachers had located in a nearby city a photo shop that could develop the film and make double sets of prints. One set would be given to the children to keep, the second would be used for the project work, which would consist of the children writing in English about the individuals or scenes depicted in their photos,

using a “writing workshop” model (Atwell, 1998; Graves, 1989). The teachers would then work with the students who needed help to revise this writing into ‘publishable’ (grammatically correct and well-structured) pieces. Liz and Connie had used similar activities in the U.S., where their students had assembled images and written accounts that, for example, critiqued city planning of parks and recreational sites, and living conditions that regularly put children’s safety at risk (Barber & Herman, 2005). Aware that assumptions about language development embedded in writing workshop approaches have been critiqued (e.g., Dyson, 1993) for ignoring the socio-political contexts (and uses) of children’s writing, Connie and Liz balanced these critiques with their concerns regarding cultural differences in literacies.

The strategy of having children conduct inquiry into their lives through photography is widespread among documentarians, environmental psychologists, and planners working with young children throughout the world (e.g., Ewald, 2001; National Geographic Child Research Projects, 2003). It parallels the research technique of “photo-elicitation” in which photographs taken by children are used to structure interviews with them (e.g., Clark-Ibanez, 2004; Orellana, 1999), as well as methods of participatory action research (e.g., McIntyre and Lykes, 2004). The objective here, however, was not to conduct interviews for a research project but to construct an activity that could engage the students in what was for many the difficult task of writing and revising in a foreign language. It would embed that writing in the larger, more immediately engaging activity of exploring and representing their everyday lives and settings. As the children explored and analyzed their environments, the teacher-researchers would be assisting and studying their language practices.

It was this approach that attracted Reuthers, Frank, and Lucy to work with the project. Reuthers argued that taking students through a process of writing about topics significant to them (their photos), revising (for meaning) and then editing these writings (for surface features of English), would support the children in creating a pleasing written product (a book of student writings), and provide much-needed practice in the

use of written English that might help the students on the Standard Eight exams.

However, the Malawian teachers pointed out that disposable cameras are neither produced in nor imported into Malawi (only 9 of the 64 Standard Eight students had used a camera before) and that their scarcity would bring a price: if the cameras went home it was very possible that adults or older youth would take them away from the children and sell them in the public markets. The revised strategy was to allow the children to use the cameras on the school grounds, and ask them to draw pictures of home and community practices. In addition, each of the three Standard Eight teachers would take cameras outside school to document community life in photos the students could write about (see Harper, 2002, on photo elicitation based on photos taken by others).

Once the photos and drawings had been produced, the plan was for Liz to teach a mini-lesson using copies of writings by her and Connie’s students in the U.S. to illustrate the kinds of things the Malawi students might want to include with the pictures they had taken: names, dates and descriptions of people and places, discussions of the significance of the people, objects, places and events they had photographed. Frank and Reuthers would translate directions into ChiChewa whenever needed and students who were more proficient in English would be asked to assist those who were struggling. The students would then write.

In keeping with the writing workshop approach, at the end of the writing session the teachers would analyze the students’ drafts to identify areas of strengths and need, and then use this analysis to produce an “Author’s Checklist” – a chart identifying usage and structural issues that students should check for as they revised their works. The checklist would be taped to chalkboard, walls, and windows to guide the children’s revisions and editing in the next day’s class meeting. To facilitate the revision process the teachers organized the children into groups of six students each, grouping the more proficient writers with the less proficient to provide assistance to the latter and allow the former to share and expand their knowledge. Once the groups had been sent to their

revision and editing tasks, all five teachers would move from group to group to clarify expectations and assist the children in their efforts to polish the writing for “publication” in a class-authored book.

Borrowed Authorship

Some of the students’ writings about their homes and lives were not so different from the writings of their American age-mates:

Our Neighbor’s House

I would like to tell you about what our neighbor does. Our neighbor likes farming. Our neighbor likes keeping ducks and chickens, and also likes growing fruits and crops like maize, millet, cassava, ground nuts, mangoes and pawpaws. In our country people all over like farming, even at our school we learn different types of methods of farming, like rotation of crops. This means when you plant one crop this year, the other year you will plant another crop. That’s what rotation means. And farmers do this because other crops fix the soil. . . .

Such texts were atypical, however, and for reasons of space, we focus here on some unanticipated features of the writing the children did for the drawings they made of their lives at home in their villages. Most of the Standard Eight students had significant difficulty writing in English, and our emphasis here is on the strategies they employed to create texts.

A number of the children had written the very same stories. Pieces existed in varying stages of completion, but were identical otherwise, word-for-word copies of stories from their English textbook. A story appearing often in the boys’ writing, “A Lion’s Tail for a Bride,” featured a young male hero besotted by a beautiful girl. Her father, however, wishing to avert the marriage, had sent the young suitor on an impossible task: to fetch a lion’s tail in exchange for his bride. One Standard Eight boy copied the story in its entirety, but others had copied only to the part in which the boy first attempts to cut off the lion’s tail: “When all the lions were asleep he crept quietly

towards the biggest lion” (Malawi Primary Education, *Activities With English*, Std. 8, 1996, pp. 125-127).

In this context the “writing conference” that forms part of the writing workshop approach became an occasion for inquiry as well as instruction. When Liz sat down on the classroom door stoop to conference with Rennie, one of the boys who had copied the Lion story, she first suggested that he must have really liked that story “to use part of it in [his] own writing.” Rennie agreed that this was so. Then Liz asked Rennie how his own version of the story was going to end. Rennie looked confused. Could a story end differently from the way it had in the English textbook? A small crowd of students gathered around. Liz explained again that Rennie, as author, could finish his own story in any way that he chose. Rennie glanced about conspiratorially, then dictated to Liz:

This boy, he will have a conclusion about how to find a tail. A lion got his tail caught in a trap. Lanzunguzeni [lead character from the story] found the tail and took it to Ligowe [father of the bride]. He gets the girl for his bride. They will be very, very happy!

Rennie’s initial puzzlement at the request that he supply his own ending to a story he has partially copied suggests he is operating off a different understanding of the task than the one intended. He can readily supply one, however, maintaining the narrative trajectory of the story.

While the story most often borrowed by the Standard Eight boys featured heroic deeds with animals to gain a bride, the story most often copied by the girls, by contrast, was a tale about a wife who had failed to cook the nsima (corn or cassava-based porridge that is a staple in the Malawian diet) properly, and whose husband then “beat her until she was bleeding heavily.”

There are at least two issues to address: Why did the students copy? And what do the gender differences in choices of borrowed authorship mean? When Liz and Connie mentioned the wife-beating reading selection to Lucy, Frank and Reuthers, they responded that, yes, husbands in Malawi sometimes used violence against their wives. According to

traditional Chewa views, women are expected to maintain and project for the people in their villages the characteristic of *ulemerero wa umunthu*, roughly translated as human dignity. For a female to display human dignity, she must place herself in service to males and accept their wrath as a reasonable reaction to such things as a chair that is misplaced in the home, or maize that has not been properly pounded for the family's *nsima* (Ribohn, 2002).

A background of competing cultural and textual discourses set the stage for the drama that unfolded as Lilian, the first girl invited for a writing conference, sat down beside Liz.

Liz: You must have really been interested in this story to use part of it in your own writing.

Lilian: Yes, I was.

Liz: There is a way authors can use other people's writing. I will show you how, if you can find for me the book that you got this from.

Lilian went to her desk, came back with a copy of her English textbook, and thumbed through the text to find the right page: “. . . and her husband beat her until she was bleeding heavily” (Malawi Primary Education, *Activities With English*, Std. 8, 1996, pp. 3-35).

As with Rennie, Liz showed Lilian how to cite the text she had “borrowed” in her piece. As none of the girls had finished copying this story, Liz then asked Lilian how she wanted hers to end. The crowd of students on the doorstep was growing steadily. It was considerably more transgressive for a girl to alter a story about gender relations than for Rennie to think up a shortcut to help his character gain a bride. Lilian thought for a moment, then dictated:

About the woman, she began cooking in her home, sweeping the floor, washing clothing and sewing. She got healed from her wounds. The woman's husband goes to work every day.

Liz interrupted Lilian to inquire whether she thought that this woman and this man could live together in peace after this incident. Lilian nodded

that she thought so. Liz slowly re-read the line, “and her husband beat her until she was bleeding heavily,” and looked once again at Lilian. Could this woman so easily forgive this man? Other girls in the crowd huddled around Lilian began to murmur dissent.

Lilian dictated:

Then he apologized. They might now be a happy family together.

Liz then asked Lilian if she thought the woman would want to keep living with that man after he had beaten her so badly. Students, both males and females, crouched in close. Lilian's bewildered look suggested she didn't understand. Liz asked Anna, a student who had more facility with English, to sit down beside Lilian and translate for her. Lilian now warmed considerably to the task and dictated:

We think it is good for a wife to do her jobs at home, but we do not think it is right for someone to beat a wife.

Girls in the group giggled and looked at each other as Lilian strode off triumphantly.

Buoyed by Lilian's bravura, the next girl to conference with Liz, Umodzi, fearlessly dictated a more forceful ending:

The wife took a pole and beat the husband bad. The husband says he is sorry, and the wife says she is sorry. Now the family is happy because the wife and the husband help each other with the work.

What can we make of the students' writing and such exchanges? Consider the phenomenon of copying from the text. Among the potential pitfalls of importing western pedagogical ideas into non-western settings, Croft (2002) suggests that western practices emphasize the visual and individual at the expense of the oral and collective, and argues that “indicators and interpretations of learner-centered teaching that derive from Western cultures may not be relevant in Malawi, particularly the rural areas” (p. 321). Yet by Standard Eight the ideologies of language and pedagogical structures of the school system inherited from the British colonial administration may have produced a set of understandings and expectations that are more

constraining than the extra-school language and learning practices of the students. In Malawian classrooms, especially by Standard Eight, when preparation for the crucial examinations becomes the pressing concern, English is taught using textbook exercises that look much like what students might be expected to do on the exams, leaving the children to rarely (if ever) write original or creative compositions. Part of what seems to have happened when students were asked to write drafts about their drawings (suspending the expectation of perfect spelling, grammar, and form, encouraging personal and autobiographical reflection) is that the proposed task failed to register as meaningful schoolwork, and students instead struggled to produce a good product for the teacher in the form they had been taught to produce. Copying examples of a good product from the English textbook suggests on the one hand a form of what [Bloome, Puro, and Theodorou \(1989\)](#) label “procedural display”:

Procedural display can be compared to a group of actors who have memorized their roles and who enact a play for each others’ benefit without necessarily knowing what happens in the play or what the play means. . . . Procedural display occurs when teachers and students are displaying for each other that they are getting the lesson done, constructing a cultural event within a cultural institution – which is not at all the same thing as substantive engagement in some academic content. (p. 272)

At the same time, the copying suggests that these students conceived of the academic writer role as that of an “animator,” in Erving Goffman’s (1981) terms – the person the words come out of – rather than an “author,” the person who “formulated and scripted the statements that get made” (p. 167).

Liz’s line of questions prompting Lillian to assume the author’s role and provide an alternate conclusion moves along a thin line between encouraging Lillian to engage in creative re-telling and scaffolding the discourse to push the narrative in the direction preferred by the American teacher (e.g., [Michaels, 1985](#); [Cazden, 1983](#)). Yet an awareness of the plight

of girls was hardly limited to Liz and Connie. Head teacher Alippo Ussi, who had made photographs of the community for the children to write about, had also written her own accounts to go with them. All dealt with the problems of girls and women.

Buying and Selling

A young lady selling sweet potatoes with her baby on her back is a mother of five children. She has to do that business to earn her living. . . . Most Malawian ladies marry very young. As the result they have big families to look after.

Girl Child in Malawi

Why should girls be victims? Malawian girl child is a victim, because she has to do a lot of chores at home after coming from school. Some of the work that they do includes washing plates, sweeping the house, pounding nsima, cooking and looking for the little baby who is at home. Girls have no time to revise school work at home. Boys have nothing to do after school. Most of them, they just play football waiting for their supper . . .

Gender

It is interesting to see a man pounding [nsima] because it is not common in our Malawian culture. . . . There are some men who do not want to help their wives with home chores, thinking it’s for women. Look at Beston [Alippo’s husband, pictured pounding nsima while he watches after his granddaughter], he is a man as you are. You better change your attitude and help your loved wife.

Given this context, the question of why students chose stories to copy by gender is more difficult to answer. If they simply chose stories featuring people of their own gender, why these particular ones? One problem is that our study of necessity departs from some common features of teacher inquiry: it was limited to one month in length (although it has been recreated in successive summers) and it depended on the presence of an artificially large number of teachers and hence lower student-teacher ratios than most Malawian teachers enjoy.

Yet if this arrangement leaves us with unanswered questions, it is hard to see how practical inquiry can proceed without such tentative initial efforts. At the least, work such as ours is key in two ways: it identifies questions to be addressed more systematically in future work, and it creates networks of association connecting teachers on two continents.

In terms of the first, we can ask how Domasi Demonstration Primary avoids the national pattern of attrition (Tlou et al., 2004) and instead retains almost as many girls as boys in the Standard Eight class. At the same time, we need to understand better the processes that lead over 80% of these students to fail the Standard Eight exam. For both boys and girls we need to know how the constructions of gender embedded in the language of power, English, shape students' understandings of the relation of education to everyday life. The Malawian government's Gender Appropriate Curriculum Unit was to revise textbooks "to make them gender sensitive and to portray girls and women in more positive roles" through equalizing illustrations showing men and women, for example, but "not all teachers . . . received [training] . . . on how to effectively teach the new curriculum in a gender sensitive approach" (Maluwa-Banda, 2003, p. 13). However, the most recent edition of the Standard Eight English textbook retains the selection quoted by the girls in the Domasi Standard Eight classroom. As Michael Apple argues:

Texts are really messages to and about the future. . . . They participate in creating what society has recognized as legitimate and truthful, . . . [they] help recreate a major reference point for what knowledge, culture, belief and morality really are (1993, p. 49, as cited in Ndimande, 2004.)

Currently in Malawi few students graduate from Form Four (the last year of secondary school) with a School Certificate, and only a tiny percent are females. Our look at the educational and social context for girls suggests that the shortage of secondary schools, the sorting-out testing system modeled on British colonial practices, and laws and institutions that discriminate and endanger girls and women are reinforced by school texts that

unproblematically reproduce images of violence against women. Never before had we as fully understood "curriculum as a political act involving negotiations, contestation and conflict in which dominant groups have the power and privilege to determine the kinds of knowledge taught in school" (Ndimande, 2004).

Messages to the Future

Perhaps as important as the knowledge gained and the questions raised through inquiry is the demand it generates for association, participation, and action. As the American teachers were saying good-byes on their last day at Domasi Demonstration Primary, a Standard Eight boy slipped a note into Liz's hand addressed "To Anyone U.S.A.," a plea for association, contact, the "space time expansion" (Katz, 2004) promised by new global connections. For Connie and Liz this meant a new sense of "responsibility at a distance," an obligation to maintain contact and collaboration with their Malawian colleagues whose working conditions and lack of resources, in addition to the problematic health and environmental infrastructures of their communities, place enormous constraints on their teaching. Lucy wrote about the conditions for teachers in Malawi:

Education in Malawi

Due to overpopulation, teachers in schools have problems with large classes. One class may have 60 to 100 pupils. Can you imagine how busy a teacher can be, in order to assist each and every pupil, in a class like the one below which is partly shown? Although this problem is there, teachers try their best in order to achieve their goals. . . .

In the teacher workroom at Domasi Demonstration Primary there is a hand-lettered sign that reads:

God saw my work, He smiled.
Saw my salary. He wept.

Bekisizwe Ndimande (2004) argues that we must challenge any form of education that reproduces racial, class, gender and cultural oppression of one group over the other, and that decolonizing education takes place when educators and curriculum developers

begin to evaluate and examine the nature of the curriculum and textbook content to determine if it is truly liberatory. Textbook content in Malawi upholds practices such as wife beating. Girls wanting to create successful texts for their American teachers employed this textbook content to do so. From what competing discourses on gendered relations can young people choose as they attempt to write their lives?

Yet we, concluding here in the voice of Liz and Connie, must ask as well how our own practices in the U.S. are complicit in forms of colonizing education. Recognizing that we are outsiders to the Malawian culture, in all of our cross-cultural endeavors we are striving for an “I don’t know” status, to avoid approaching life and circumstances in Malawi with yet another colonizing perspective. In this paper we are attempting to make our findings available in relevant ways to local stakeholders in the Domasi site, and we continue to participate in that community in an ongoing way. In between our yearly summer returns to Malawi, we send funds to support instruction and regularly correspond with teachers and students via email and letters. At home in the U.S. we are attempting to interrogate the privilege we enjoy and the myths of meritocracy, while we strive to strengthen our alliances to nudge at the centers of power to which we have access. As we draw on the students’ and their teachers’ writings, drawings and photography, our own photos and fieldnotes, and our continued email and postal correspondences with students and teachers in Malawi, we constantly remind ourselves of our positionings within the “power sensitive conversations” (Bhavnani, 1993) we share with our informants. We continue to explore how photography and writing for authentic audiences allow children not just to engage in English literacy, but to make sense of themselves and their worlds. The meanings and messages they craft and help us craft, we hope, will act as messages to a better future.

Postscript

In April 2008 a teacher at Domasi Demonstration Primary informed us of the untimely death of co-author Reuthers Malembanje at age 35. Reuthers had written to us in January 2008, jubilant that after four

years of attempts he had finally been accepted in the Bachelor of Education program at Domasi College. Once there, however, his health worsened until he succumbed March 18, leaving two young sons and a daughter. We have since developed a Bachelor of Education day student scholarship in his memory: the North Carolina A&T Malembanje Scholarship at Domasi College of Education.

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Reuthers Malembanje, former standard Eight teacher of English at the Demonstration School, had been accepted into and begun studies in the B.Ed. program at Domasi College of Education when he was taken ill and died March 2008.

“The Beginning of a Beloved Community”: Teaching and Learning Within the Literacy Tradition of African American Women Writers

by *Kelly Wissman*

Is there no context for our lives? No song, no literature, no poem full of vitamins, no history connected to experience that you can pass along to help us start strong?

—Toni Morrison, 1993 Nobel Lecture in Literature, p. 27

For a little over one academic year I taught an elective course exploring poetry and photography with a group of young women of color in an urban public charter high school. Framing the development and research of this learning context were both the expressed desires of the students themselves for a different kind of learning space within their school and my own questions surrounding the possibilities of creating educational contexts supportive of young women enriched by the arts and poetry. Within this time of standardized and scripted curricula, what happens when we craft alternative in-school spaces to “invent what we desire” (Rich, 1993)? Within this time deemed post-feminist and post-racial, what happens if we take seriously that race and gender matter in how we live our lives and the artistic work we produce? What happens when students are invited to consider poetry as a possible venue for, in June Jordan’s words, “taking control of the language of your life” (Muller, 1995, p. 3)?

If inquiry, as Lorri Neilsen (1998) contends, is a “conspiracy, a breathing together” (p. 262), then the kind of air we breathed in the class most often was the socially charged, socially grounded, and socially visionary air of contemporary African American women writers. Their words created the context; their

words became inspiration for the students’ own words. In this article, I explore what happened when I brought into the classroom writers who in richly varied ways engaged the creative process toward the production of what Dionne Brand (1995) calls “relevant, charged, politically conscious, memorable” (p. 167) expression.

The Course

Starting from the premise that we are all artists and poets, the students and I pursued critical encounters with autobiographical writing and photography both in and out of school. As an intentionally collaborative group, we engaged with the works of socially conscious writers and image-makers; used reflective processes to discuss issues of gender, race, and social injustice; took photographs and wrote poetry to explore lives and identities; and shared this work with each other and with others through conference presentations, exhibitions, and a submission to an on-line education journal. Sixteen students participated in the course; some students participated in all three trimesters it was offered, while others for only one. The majority of the students self-identified as African American. Three students identified respectively as Puerto Rican, multi-racial, and Black/Grenadian. One white student participated before needing to withdraw for academic reasons. The students ranged in age from 14-16. The course met three times a week for 60 minutes a session. While photography was an important component of the class, I focus in this article on the reading and writing of poetry within this setting.

The Study

Methodologically situated within the traditions of teacher research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1999) and feminist research (Fine, 1992), my “praxis-oriented inquiry” (Lather, 1991) involved systematic documentation and analysis of this context and the writing and photography produced by the young women within it. Data sources included my teacher/researcher journal in which I wrote ethnographically detailed descriptions of each class meeting, emerging questions, and reflections on my practice as a teacher and researcher; student writing and photography; class transcripts; and interviews with the students.

My work with the students was shaped by my own life history and experiences as an educator and qualitative researcher located within urban contexts. In conceptualizing this teacher research study, I drew from often overlapping roles and work within community centers, urban public schools, after school programs, and African American communities. I also drew from ongoing explorations of the possibilities and constraints of pursuing this work as a white woman. Embracing an identity as a teacher researcher within this study arose out of a felt desire to enact this work and not just observe it, to create the very conditions for it, to know it from the inside. As Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (1993) contend:

When teachers do research, they draw on interpretive frameworks built from their histories and intellectual interests, and because the research process is embedded in practice, the relationship between knower and known is significantly altered. (p. 43)

Cochran-Smith and Lytle not only capture the unique nature of the knowledge production afforded by teacher research that drew me to imagine and eventually to design this particular kind of study, but also suggest the intention to work towards personal, institutional, and social change that is often present in teacher research endeavors. As they argue, “At the base of this commitment is a deep and passionately enacted responsibility to students’ learning and life

chances and to transforming the policies and structures that limit students’ access to these opportunities” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 279). In this study I see the multiplicities of my subject positions as a researcher, teacher, co-learner, and feminist as resources and as potential contributors to emerging scholarship that seeks to traverse the in-school/out-of-school dichotomy (Hull & Schultz, 2002) and that seeks to imagine schools as potential sites for socially transformative work to occur for young women (McCormick, 2004; Weiler, 2000).

In their research, both DeBlase (2003) and Sutherland (2005) find limited opportunities for young women of color to have extended conversations about complex issues of identity within classroom literature discussions. Both pose compelling and sobering questions about how classrooms can be designed in ways that support young women of color in negotiating identities and if pedagogies can support all students in viewing literacy as a critical social practice. In my work informed by teacher research I hope to add to that conversation and suggest that while limitations persist in traditional classroom arrangements and school structures, there may be possibilities for imagining different kinds of educational spaces informed by epistemologies of feminism and social justice.

Of Traditions and Transformations

In her study of the literacy practices of nineteenth-century African American women essayists, Jacqueline Jones Royster (2000) argues that African American women have consistently conceived of writing as a sociopolitical act and that across generations, locations, and writing genres their work can be seen to “pivot on notions of belief, identity, and social responsibility” (p. 107). By identifying the strategies of Black women to use literacies to “fulfill a quest for a better world” (p. 74) from social locations as mothers, teachers, poets, and essayists, Elaine Richardson (2003) also suggests how literacies emerge from and reflect gendered and racialized experiences and ways of knowing. In my course I chose to draw on the poetic work African American women authors such as Margaret Walker, Sonia

Sanchez, June Jordan, and Nikki Giovanni. These poets envision and enact literacy as a dynamic tool for change and regeneration. Their works reflect an understanding of literacy as embodied knowledge and action. As [Royster \(2000\)](#) contends, “the history of African American women’s literacy is a story of visionaries, of women using sociocognitive ability to re-create themselves and to reimagine their worlds” (p. 109). In this context, the incorporation of these writers infused the course with epistemologies that consistently revealed a critical tradition of literacy and provided ongoing opportunities to participate in and contribute to this tradition. In ways that may at first appear counter-intuitive, then, centering a course in a “tradition,” promoted insights and work oriented toward personal and social transformation.

“I Want to Write”

The students’ “I Want to Write” poems provide key insights into both the poetic possibilities of emulating African American women writers as well as to the transformative possibilities of centering a course in a critical literary tradition. In [Margaret Walker’s \(1989\)](#) poem entitled “I Want to Write,” she describes her desires to write “the songs of my people.” The images in the poem capture Walker’s own melodic imaginings of these songs emerging from places of both struggle and hope, from “sob-torn throats” to “sunshine laughter in a bowl.” Reprising the line “I want to write” throughout the poem, Walker uses this device to modulate and provide texture to her great desire for writing, most notably her desire to use her artistic talents to “frame their dreams into words; their souls into notes.” The poem ends with an imaginative rendering of these songs being flung into the sky, filled with stars, and becoming a “mirrored pool of brilliance in the dawn.” While the poem suggests Walker’s poetic inspiration and intentions, the final lines of the poem especially suggest the power of these songs – and poetry itself – to be illuminative and transformative. Walker first published this now classic poem in 1934 when she was 19 years old.

After reading the poem I asked the students to talk about the images they most connected to and to

consider the kinds of meanings and purposes Walker assigned to writing. I then asked them to write their own “I want to write” poems. Here are three of the poems:

I want to write
 I want to write about the struggles of
 being a teenager growing up in a world
 where you have to scream to be heard
 I want to write about being heart broken
 by someone you loved and having them
 not feeling the same
 I want to write about wanting
 to live out our dream and wishing it comes true
 I want to write about holding on to the
 past and not being able to see the future
 Surviving the present
 I want to write about happiness that
 lasts forever, and not only in my dreams.
 I want to write about the pain and stress
 that I have endured from being me.
 I just want to write.

by Lynn

I want to write.
 I want to write about the pain that I endure.
 I want to write about the hurt that will be forever
 mourned.
 I want to write about my tear-filled eyes.
 I want to write about my calling sighs.
 I want to write about the laughter in my words.
 I want to write about the freedom like a bird.
 I want to write.

by Jasmyn

I want to write
 I want to write about the mentally oppressed
 and we females who are distressed
 I want to write about discrimination
 that is blinding our generation, causing us the
 youth of tomorrow’s future to fall in the line
 of demoralizing the we’s and us, and the they’s
 and yours
 I want to write about the givers of

life, showing the world their strife, to come up
 from under dominant figure
 I want to write about our liberation
 and will, to win this rat race
 I want to write
 I want to write about life.
 by Maya

In rich and complex ways, these poems suggest the deep social and personal significance of writing in these young women's lives. In naming their desires to write, they seem to believe as [Adrienne Rich \(1993\)](#) does in "in art's social presence – as breaker of official silences, as voice for those whose voices are disregarded, and as a human birthright" (p. 99). Lynn writes of teenagers whose voices are disregarded and who need to scream to be heard. Jasmyn's clarity of vision and precision of imagery suggests to me that writing to her is nothing short of her own birthright. And, Maya, frequently the breaker of official silences within our class and outside of it, claims the power of writing to generate liberation. Rhetorically, these young poets seem to recognize the power of writing to assist them in what Maya and Jasmyn would later describe to me as "making a way" ([Wissman, 2007](#)), drawing attention to and naming their yearning for opportunities to address injustice and difference, to contemplate the beautiful and the painful, and to extend the power of literacy to transgress silences within an in-school space. By drawing on the words of Walker, the students were saying something important to themselves and to the other students about how writing can be a place to name desires for personal and social transformations.

Writing Within a "Beloved Community"

While members of the literacy tradition of African American women served as touchstones for reading and discussion in the course, the students' own poetry written both in and out of school also became central texts of the course. At the same time, opportunities for sharing poetry became increasingly defining of the context that in many ways became what [June Jordan \(1995\)](#) might call a "beloved community," a context in which students supported each other as poets and

storytellers of their own lives. About midway through the course, Lynn wrote a poem entitled "Damn, I Look Good" after seeing a poem of the same title within a book I brought to class ([Franco, 2001](#)). In certain lines of Lynn's poem, the voice and rhythms of [Maya Angelou's \(1995\)](#) "Phenomenal Woman," a poem we had read earlier in the course, also come through. Lynn's line, "I approach you with the pep in my step, the grace of my smile, the flicker of my eyes," picks up on Angelou's repetition of imagery and the admiring of her own unique spirit expressed through her physical features and movements. Lynn also repeats the line "Damn, I look good" throughout the poem in ways reminiscent of Angelou's repetition of "phenomenal woman" in hers. In the poem, Lynn claims her own attractiveness and assertiveness as a young woman living in and traveling through a contemporary city, evoking images and words suggesting the landscape and language uses that surround her. Recounting her journey as "Miss Diva coming through," Lynn claims her abilities to thrive in this setting and indeed to conquer it effortlessly due to her physical beauty, stylish clothing, and confidence. Yet, like Angelou, Lynn claims her own "inner beauty" and "unique personality" as the true sources of her winning ways. As Lynn writes:

I could wear five layers of clothes
 And still make a man fall to his knees
 From head to toe this is all of me, my unique
 personality to my inner beauty

After Lynn read her poem out loud to the group, the students responded to her confident presentation of herself and evocative language with a spontaneous burst of clapping, laughing, and praise – and immediate requests for her to read it again and to make photocopies for the class. Maya and Jasmyn, who had been in the course with Lynn the previous trimester, looked at me with stunned, amused, and proud expressions and responded:

Jasmyn: I was waiting and I was like, this is Lynn?

Maya: Right. Whoa. Lynn. Wow. Wow.

Jasmyn: She's like...

Maya: I've been waiting for something like this for, like –

Jasmyn: From her, right?

Maya: Go, Lynn.

Both Maya and Jasmyn recognized how Lynn's poem brought out facets of her they had not seen or heard before. Their comments suggest their familiarity with her writing in the course over time and how they "were waiting" for the fuller emergence of her poetic voice. In this way, this example is indicative not only of Lynn's own growth as a poet, but also indicative of the ethos of the group containing members knowledgeable of each other's work and supportive of their efforts.

It is difficult to render in print the electricity that filled the room when the students read their work out loud; however, in conjuring up the immediacy of our context, I find a moving resonance with [Jordan's \(1995\)](#) words about what occurs when people become poets, especially poets in a community:

. . . anyone who becomes a practicing poet has an excellent chance of becoming somebody real, somebody known, self-defined, and attuned to and listening and hungering for kindred real voices utterly/articulately different from his or her own voice. (p. 8)

In creating their own opportunities for writing and in creating habits of being in the group that met their own needs as writers and members of this literacy community, the students were clearly asserting themselves by inventing conditions and processes necessary for the creation of an in-school space responsive to their desires to speak and listen to each other.

The Potential of "Beloved Communities"

Throughout my time teaching and learning with the students, I came to realize the potential of grounding pedagogy within the literacy tradition of African American women and the potential of crafting intentional learning communities reflective of the epistemologies embedded within that literacy tradition. Grounding literacy work within the literacy

tradition of African American women can support learning environments where literacy is enacted as a social practice, where inquiry is pursued, and where knowledge is constructed relationally. This choice may be of particular consequence to young women of African descent given how this literacy tradition reflects back to them images of themselves, centers their experiences and lives, and exposes them to the vibrant and multi-faceted tradition of accessing the power of literacy for personal and community uplift ([Gadsden, 1992](#); [Ladson-Billings, 1992](#)). I would also argue that this tradition could be illuminative for students from a diversity of backgrounds. We should continue to problematize notions that multicultural education means simply adding works to the curriculum that correspond to students' identities. Rather, by considering the dynamic interplay of identity and knowledge-making, of experience and literary production, students can come to enhanced understandings of their own and others' practices of literacies.

[Jordan \(1995\)](#) writes that poetry can "build a revolution in which speaking and listening to somebody becomes the first and last purpose to every social encounter" (p. 3). Within this course, it was this desire not only to write, but also to hear the voices of other young women writing that feels to me most significant. In this regard, we may wish to consider the power of creating multiple arenas for speaking and listening with young women across the domains of teaching and researching and across both formal and informal learning spaces. Jordan further contends that communities of practicing poets hunger for the opportunity both to write and to be in the company of other writers, and concludes that within these spaces it may be possible to form what she calls the "most reasonable basis for the political beginning of a beloved community: a democratic state in which the people can trust the names they have invented for themselves and for each other" (p. 8).

Filled as they often are with surveillance, sexual harassment, and standardized curricula, schools are often far from the "beloved communities" Jordan evokes. Within a "beloved community" created by poetry, it may be possible for a time to move beyond

the trajectory of our current national discourses related to urban students, beyond deficit discourses, and beyond test scores as sole determiners of student identity and potential. By developing literacy theory and practice in conversation with students and with theoretical frameworks attuned to the social nature of identities, literacies, and epistemologies it may be possible to create in-school spaces more reflective of the ideals of democracy and social justice.

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Re-writing the “Master” Narrative: Sue Monk Kidd’s Journey to the Black Madonna

by Kathleen Carico

It is hard to imagine that anyone who loves books in America has not heard of *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002), by Sue Monk Kidd. It made the New York Times bestseller list, and its professional reviews are glowing. Book clubs for adolescents have chosen it as have book clubs for adults. The movie version was recently released, to the delight of its fans, myself included. Numerous reasons make it compelling: the characters are unforgettable, the drama is real and historic, and the language, particularly main character Lily’s narration, is lyrical.

However, even though I joined the millions of readers who love this book, I was vaguely irritated by one feature: the religious aspect as depicted in the worship of Black Mary, a statue that another of the main characters, August Boatwright, kept in her living room. I would have been happy with a psychological approach to a story that showed the power of love and connectedness, but I was not as happy with what I could see only as a religious solution to the main character’s problems.

Having spent too many years oppressed by fundamentalist Christian doctrine, I initially thought the book slightly marred by the devotion to the Black Madonna. I knew that her message (delivered through August to Lily Owens) represented the fullness of each one of us, our goodness, and our strength. However, I thought she also represented a tradition I had rejected and was still struggling to recover from, and I wondered why she had to be included.

Then I read Sue Monk Kidd’s *Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman’s Journey from Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine* (1996). As a result, I came to understand much more clearly, I believe, what Mary was intended to represent, and I knew certainly that her presence in the novel was

essential and even desirable. In Mary, Sue Monk Kidd was re-writing a master narrative, one she herself struggled to recognize and deconstruct in her memoir, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*. In this article, I take a brief look at this master narrative and the two people who lived it, first, Sue Monk Kidd and then Lily Owens, the fourteen-year-old protagonist of *The Secret Life of Bees*.

The Master Narrative

Originally stemming from the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard, the meta- or grand narrative (what is commonly referred to as the master narrative) is “the supposedly transcendent and universal truths that serve to justify and legitimate Western culture” (Bertens, 2002, p. 246). Rosen (2003) sees it as the one story that “generates all the other stories” (Paragraph 1). His application of the master narrative to his own profession, journalism, provides a current example of how this might work:

In standard coverage of political campaigns . . . the master narrative for a long time has been winning—who’s going to win, who seems to be winning, what the candidates are doing to win, how much money it takes to win. . . . Winning, then, is the story that produces all (or almost all) the other stories, and when you figure in it you are likely to become news. (Paragraph 3)

Lyotard’s examples of metanarratives, first discussed in 1984, include his arguments regarding the societal outcomes of a political metanarrative versus a philosophical one (Bertens, 2002). Since then, many authors have identified the existence of master narratives within their own domains: Rosen’s most recent example in journalism; Aldridge’s (2006)

examination of history textbooks, particularly in their representation of Martin Luther King; [Aguirre's \(2005\)](#) consideration of academe, especially as it limits personal narrative; [Lawless's \(2003\)](#) exploration of a transformed master narrative in religion as women "shift the religious subject"; and [Richardson's \(1997\)](#) analysis of modern literary theory and its restrictive master narratives, to name only a few.

It is Lawless's look at the master narrative in religion that is most directly relevant to the journey Sue¹ takes in *Dissident Daughter*. Lawless restricts her discussion primarily to Western culture and the Christian faith, and uses the term "religious master narrative" to describe a narrative "in which males are privileged by culture, society, and the church" (p. 61). Her study of women in the pulpit suggests that women can disrupt the narrative "by their presence, voice, and experience" (p. 62). It is both reminiscent of and perhaps a fulfillment of the implied promises in two groundbreaking works on women's issues. First, [Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* \(1986\)](#) shows a study of women, who are very much like Sue Monk Kidd, whose natural thinking and learning processes have been negated by a master narrative that does not include them. Second, [Gilligan and Mikel Brown's *Meeting at the Crossroads* \(1992\)](#) shows adolescent girls, who are very much like Lily Owens, who have learned to exchange natural discourses for those that are "approved." Neither text mentions a master narrative, but both the younger and older women of each one live under its oppression.

The Dance of the Dissident Daughter

The religious master narrative as suggested by [Lawless \(2003\)](#) is indeed the topic of Sue Monk

Kidd's memoir and the focus of her journey. Sue was raised in a Southern Baptist Church, and as an adult was married to a Southern Baptist minister who served as a chaplain at their local university. She taught Sunday School and, of course, attended church regularly. In her context (as well as in my former context), the term "master" narrative is a most relevant and also most tragic pun: Jesus is often referred to in the New Testament as "Master"; man is said to be the "head" (master) of the wife; man is to have dominion (mastery) over the earth and subdue it. Thus, humans, animals, and the earth are all to be governed by the male of the human species, and, to reinforce that, the governing deity is masculine. [Rosen \(2003\)](#) writes, "the longer [the master narrative] hangs around the more natural the thing seems" (Paragraph 10). This particular religious master narrative has been "hanging around" for approximately 2000 years, time enough to perfect a framework that answers almost any life question or concern with a response that derives "naturally" from its structure.

The Dissident Daughter chronicles Sue's process as she re-writes this narrative, and she maps the journey in four stages, shown here only in the most cursory of summaries: the recognition of a "feminine wound" and her struggle to conceive a "feminine self" (Part One: Awakening); her introduction to the "feminine divine" through her exploration of myths and dreams (Part Two, Initiation); her conscientious study of the Divine Feminine through researching "Goddess" in ancient history (Part Three: Grounding); and her exercise of and experiences with the new power that her journey opened up to her (Part Four: Empowerment). Parts Two and Three are most relevant to the later discussion of Black Mary from *The Secret Life of Bees*, so here I will elaborate briefly on them.

Dreams, Images, Messages, and Visitations

Although the focus is on Parts Two and Three, I dip back into Part One to begin a discussion of dreams that will continue throughout the book. Sue writes that even before starting her journey toward the "Sacred Feminine" she had made a habit of writing down her dreams, "believing . . . that one of the purest sources of knowledge about our lives comes from the symbols

¹Convention would dictate the use of the last name, and in this article, I began by using "Monk Kidd." I was slightly uncomfortable each time, and, in the spirit of the books I am reviewing, I finally paid attention to the discomfort. "Monk Kidd" was not working, seeming at odds with the subject as well as with the spirit of the journal I replaced it with Sue, and, though it is a liberty I took, it is not meant to be less formal or less respectful than Monk Kidd. It seems more connective.

and images deep within” (p. 11). It is through a dream that her feminist awakening begins, a dream in which she sees herself pregnant with, then giving birth to herself. Clearly always a thinker and learner, she muses on her dream, wondering what kind of person the baby girl would grow up to be. In anticipation of the events to occur following her “birth,” she buys a new journal—a pink one.

Sue’s dreams continue. In one, she is standing outside her church, where an old woman appears to her, holding a walking stick with a snake wound around it. She admonishes Sue to consider where her church is taking her. The old woman would appear often in later dreams. On other occasions, Sue dreams of red snakes (another recurring image); of labyrinths; of a figure she called the “Bishop,” whom she recognizes as an authority figure who wishes to keep her in submission to male authority; and of Nefertiti, the long-necked, Egyptian queen, a symbol to Sue that she is “sticking her neck out” quite precariously in this new venture. Sue begins to research her dreams in earnest, visiting libraries, bookstores, and museums, and she enters Jungian analysis to receive clinical help in understanding their meaning for her.

Dreams can reveal the power and intelligence of our subconscious and of humans’ connectedness to each other—even across the centuries. Sue’s intelligent subconscious showed her the Bishop, who symbolized her anxiety over leaving behind the religious tradition she had been steeped in her whole life. Bringing it out into the open helped her face it and release it. Her subconscious also showed her images and symbols of the sacred feminine that would connect her eventually to the Feminine Divine. She even found an artistic rendering of the red snakes of her dream in a picture of two statues, one holding a red snake over her head and the other with a snake wound about her arm. The statues were from the Minoan culture, and this discovery led her to a study of Greek myths, particularly the myth of Ariadne, which would connect with her labyrinth images and provide her with a metaphor to guide her journey in steady and reliable, yet miraculous ways.

The Feminine in Christian Tradition

A next major step for Sue was an effort to trace the feminine in historical accounts of the Christian tradition. It began with her study of the Goddess as the female deity: “I began to discover that for many thousands of years before the rise of the Hebrew religion, in virtually every culture of the world, people worshiped the Supreme Being in the form of a female deity—the Great Goddess” (p. 134). At some point during this time of exploration, the idea of female sacredness and power—of Goddess—began to feel real to her, and the reality was manifested to her as a deep feeling of love.

Sue walked further into this reality as she looked into the Hebrew tradition and the Old and New Testaments for any signs of a Feminine Divine. She found them: Wisdom personified as a woman; Wisdom known as Sophia; Sophia becoming Christ; Christ referring to Mary as “his divine Mother, the Holy Spirit” (pp. 146-152).

The Secret Life of Bees

The entirety of *The Secret Life of Bees* is premised on the sacredness of the female, a tradition that is quite recessive in the genes of Western Christian life and thought. Western Christianity has a powerful tradition (master narrative) which requires a powerful dislodging (major revision). Sue’s dreams, sprung from her subconscious, were powerful enough to propel her on a journey to find who she was, how valuable she was, and what she wanted. Sue’s journey, though for different reasons, was also Lily’s journey. A full, functional, loved human existence for both depended on its outcome.

Lily Seeks Her Mother

The novel starts with a journey, of Lily Owens and her caretaker Rosaleen, a large, African-American woman who must flee Lily’s peach farm in Sylvan, South Carolina, because of Rosaleen’s altercation with three white racists over her attempt to register to vote. It is 1964, and the Civil Rights Act has just been passed. Even though Rosaleen now has a legal right to vote, Lily knows she will not be protected from the anger of the racists in town and that her life is truly in danger.

At the same time, Lily has had enough of her father's cruelty and decides to run away and take Rosaleen with her. Lily is led only by the name of a town, Tiburon, South Carolina, written on the back of what seems to be a decoupage picture of a Black Madonna, one of the few belongings Lily has of her mother's. Tiburon holds the only clue for Lily in her quest to discover her mother, killed ten years earlier in a horrible accident. Arriving in Tiburon, Lily stops at a store where she spots jars of honey with the same picture of the Black Madonna she used to choose her destination. The Black Madonna honey is made by beekeeper August Boatwright and her two sisters, May and June, who live together in a hot pink house outside of Tiburon. Lily and Rosaleen travel there and take refuge.

Lily is an adolescent in crisis. She has no friends and feels love from no one except Rosaleen, and the distress she feels as a constant undercurrent in her life keeps Rosaleen's love from being sufficient. Her father T. Ray is physically and verbally abusive; she is poor; and she has a great hole in her heart since her mother's death, which has also left her with many questions: Is it true, as her father says, that her mother left her a few months before her death? How did her mother die? Did Lily really accidentally kill her? Then, after she finds the Boatwright's, she has more questions to add: What will happen when they find out the truth about her? Will they still love her? What will happen to Rosaleen if the police should discover them?

Landing at the Boatwright's is almost a fairy tale for Lily. Rosaleen is safe; Lily and she find themselves useful to the three sisters and happy to be so; Lily makes a friend in the teenage boy who works for August; and both find genuine love from the Boatwright's. However, Lily still lives with the weight of her secrets—about breaking Rosaleen out of police custody, which keeps Lily from relaxing entirely in her new setting; about her mother's death; and about her great longing for her mother, which only Rosaleen has knowledge of, and about which there is little conversation. Thus, while she is growing secure in one respect, she remains heavily burdened. When one of the characters dies suddenly, Lily sends a silent message with the deceased to take to heaven:

And I wish you would look up my mother. . . .
Tell her you saw me, that I'm at least away from
T. Ray for the time being. Say this to her: "Lily
would appreciate a sign letting her know that you
love her. It doesn't have to be anything big, but
please send something." (p. 202)

Lily Seeks Black Mary

When Lily and Rosaleen arrived at the Boatwright's hot pink house, they first met June Boatwright, then her sister May, and, while June went to find August, they encountered Black Mary in the parlor. Black Mary is the figurehead from a sailing ship and who, as August would later tell, washed up on the shore in mid-19th Century Charleston, where a slave named Obadiah found her and took her to the community's praise house. After the oldest slave declared the figurehead to be Mary, the Mother of Jesus, the story took hold, and the slaves began to pray to her and draw strength from her, the strength to attempt escape and to find freedom. The story of Mary, half recited/half sung by August, went straight from August's tongue to Lily's heart: "Obadiah pulled the figure out of the water . . . and struggled to set it upright. Then he remembered how they'd asked the Lord to send them rescue. To send them consolation. To send them freedom. Obadiah knew the Lord had sent this figure . . ." (p. 108). After the Civil War, Black Mary had come into August's family, and eventually she was passed down to August and ended up in her parlor. Every night, Lily, Rosaleen, and the sisters would repeat the Rosary and then pray personally to Black Mary.

By the time Lily met the Boatwright's, it was clear they had long ago gathered a group of adherents to Mary. These women friends (the "Daughters of Mary") came each week in colorful dresses, rhinestone clip-on earrings, and magnificent hats of feathers, fur, and fringe that Lily loved. Just as the slaves did a century earlier, the Daughters of Mary gathered in the parlor to sing and dance and to touch the red heart painted on Black Mary's chest. It was a ritual Lily desperately wanted to complete for herself. The first time she tried she was thwarted by June, whose jealousy would not allow her to welcome Lily into this most intimate of circles. She then made it a

private goal to go into the parlor one day and touch Mary's heart. And one night, she did, when the rest of the house were sleeping. As she stood in front of Mary, she prayed:

Fix me, please fix me. Help me know what to do. Forgive me. Is my mother all right up there with God? Don't let them find us. If they find us, don't let them take me back. If they find us, keep Rosaleen from being killed. Let June love me. Let T. Ray love me. Help me stop lying. Make the world better. Keep the meanness out of people's hearts. (p. 164)

Lily Finds "Herself"

After Lily finally touches the Black Mary, she looks for an opening to tell August who she really is and to find out about her mother. But the moment will be a long-time coming as one thing after another gets in the way, including a family tragedy, and all those events serve to heighten the suspense. She finally is able to tell August, and in the dramatic scene, learns some unwelcome news about her mother that makes her hurt and very, very angry. As she struggles to integrate this news into her growing consciousness of herself and of life, August tells her more about Black Mary:

August said, "Listen to me now, Lily. I'm going to tell you something I want you always to remember, all right? . . . Our Lady is not some magical being out there somewhere, like a fairy godmother. She's not the statue in the parlor. She's something inside of you. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"Our Lady is inside me," I repeated, not sure I did.

"You have to find a mother inside yourself. We all do. Even if we already have a mother, we still have to find this part of ourselves inside. Give me your hand." (p. 288)

August puts Lily's hand over her own heart and assures her that she needn't put it over Mary's heart to find the strength that she needs. She has it already. It will take another incident in Lily's life before she is able to apprehend the meaning of August's words and

actions. But when it happens, Lily remembers what August said and claims it finally for herself. Though I cannot say for certain that this is the same "Herself" Sue Monk Kidd dreamed about, it is close, for she writes these words for Lily at the end of *The Secret Life of Bees*:

Each day I visit the Black Mary . . . I feel her in unexpected moments, her Assumption into heaven happening in places inside me. She will suddenly rise, and when she does, she does not go up, up into the sky, but further and further inside me. August says she goes into the holes life has gouged out of us. (p. 302)

The Secret Life of Bees needs Black Mary. But it is not a Black Mary who threatens us, silences us, negates us, rules over us, or demands allegiance. That, unfortunately, is the religious "Master" narrative. Sue Monk Kidd re-wrote it and did it with such clarity and beauty that I can hear August's voice resound as she tells why Black Mary was sent to the slaves: ". . . to send them rescue. To send them consolation. To send them freedom" (p. 108). Rescue in the form of a Feminine Divine who models our own power and our brilliance. Consolation in the form of a Sacred Mother whose experiences of the body are celebrated, honored, and cherished. Freedom in the form of a Deity who shows us our own goodness.

The Master Narrative Revised

The Secret Life of Bees is a beautiful story of the power of love to heal, to knit together that which has been torn apart. It could also be considered a compelling psycho-drama of an abused and lonely young girl who looks for answers to her deepest questions about life and who is lucky enough to find them in a dangerous and turbulent era in the home of a beekeeper. It is, as some critics have written, a "coming-of-age" story, when Lily falls in love for the first time, and when she steps across a threshold into a greater understanding of her past and her future. However, it is also a master narrative re-written, the product of a woman who struggled hard and long, first to name the narrative under which she was living for what it was: denial of the feminine; next, to "ask the

hard questions” about her experience (p.146); further, to look for answers to those questions and dare to imagine a different way of being; then, to research possibilities for her new story; and, finally, to write it. She is still writing it, I’m sure.

“*The Divine Feminine is returning to collective consciousness, all right. She’s coming, and it will happen whether we’re ready or not.*” (*The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, p. 99)

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“Hidden” or “Hypervisible”? Writing and Representing the Pregnant and Parenting Student

by Heidi L. Hallman

I began my research study, Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens, today and the first question I was asked by LaTasha (a senior at Eastview) was, “Who are you?” And I answered in a clumsy way, saying that I was here because I was studying the school—a school for pregnant and parenting students. I told LaTasha that I wanted to learn about Eastview and its students. But, after I said that, I realized I hadn’t really answered her question.

Fieldnotes, January 2005

The first page of my field notebook begins with the above statement. Looking back on this entry now, more than three years later, I am reminded of my ongoing quest to ethically represent the participants involved in my study at Eastview School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens (all names of people and places are pseudonyms). Throughout my study, students such as LaTasha asked me the question, “Who are you?” and over time I became more comfortable in asserting things about myself. Although my research at Eastview focused primarily on teaching and learning, a critical part of the study aimed to represent students at Eastview and how they perceived themselves as mothers, students, and adolescents. I, too, was interested in asking the question of “Who are you?” As I became more deeply involved in the study, questions of how to “best” represent students’ answers to this question became a dilemma I grappled with throughout the process of writing and representing Eastview and its students.

The context of my inquiry

During the academic years of 2004-2005 and 2005-2006, I studied the teaching and learning at Eastview

School for Pregnant and Parenting Teens, a public school alternative program for teen mothers in the Midwest United States. Throughout my research, I worked to represent Eastview’s ability to provide a positive learning space for its students. Because scholars [Dierdre Kelly \(2000\)](#), [Wendy Luttrell \(2003\)](#), and [Wanda Pillow \(2004\)](#) have documented the ways in which the schooling for this population of students has been generally founded upon a “remedial” model of instruction, I aimed to illustrate how schools like Eastview assist students in presenting counter-narratives to the typical, dominant images U.S. society holds about the pregnant and parenting student.

At the time of my study, Eastview, as a school, had been in existence in the Lakeville Public School District for over twenty years, and had evolved over this period of time into a full-day middle/ high school academic program. When Eastview was founded in the mid-1970’s, it was considered a “supplementary” program for teen mothers and schooled just a handful of students. During the 2004-2006 years, Eastview enrolled up to fifty teen mothers, aged 12-19, during each quarter of the academic year.

Throughout this essay, I aim to explore the ethical dimensions of representing pregnant and parenting students (and the students at Eastview, in particular) in educational research. Part of this inquiry calls for a dialogue with scholars who have recently written about pregnant and parenting teens (e.g., [Luttrell, 2003](#); [Pillow, 2004](#)). By fostering such a dialogue, I hope to explore how these researchers have framed the methodological and ethical dilemmas of representing this group of students, thereby moving toward an ethical consideration of how “best” to represent this demographic of students in my own

research. Throughout this essay, I pose the following questions:

- Does representing the pregnant/ parenting teen as a unit of analysis undermine researchers' efforts to ethically highlight the stories of these teens?
- In representing the stories of pregnant and parenting teens, are researchers aiding in the construction of some stories as "fit" and others as "unfit"?
- In educational research, how are pregnant and parenting teens positioned both as "victims" and "free agents"?

Representing the pregnant and parenting student

In looking more closely at the nature of the outlined questions above, I am reminded of the current era in research as one touched by "the posts"—post-structuralism, post-feminism, post-colonialism (see [Ellis & Bochner, 1996](#); [Olesen, 2000](#); and [Richardson, 2000](#)). [Britzman \(2000\)](#) notes that the "posts" characterize ethnography as a "site of doubt," and therefore contemplate the state of ethnography by questioning both the position of the researcher and the researched, concluding that both standpoints are problematic and can only yield partial truths about the site of investigation. [Vidich & Lyman \(2000\)](#), who have written about the state of ethnography, conclude with the recognition that the ethnographer working in the current era must be in some ways less fearful about being part of the site of investigation while also cognizant of the fact that ethnographers have been historically imperialistic and unable to be a "full" participant in the community they research.

My role as a participant observer at Eastview over the eighteen months of my study was indeed "ethnographically-informed"; my work was observational, though not ethnographic in a modernist ethnographic and anthropological sense.¹ My role as

¹ Modernist ethnography has historically used "culture" as a defining category of analysis (see [Wolcott, 1995](#)) and has focused on the stories told by participants in order to craft a representation of the research site. "Culture" has problematically assumed a reified position in modern ethnography, though "postmodern" ethnographers recognize the need to conceptualize culture as

participant observer warranted careful attention to some of the same dilemmas ethnographers face and thinking about the tenets of ethnography aided me in considering the theoretical positioning of other researchers who have depicted pregnant and parenting teens. However, my role as an "outsider" to both Eastview and the experiences of Eastview's students prompted me to think about how my experiences resonated with those of the students at Eastview. One day at Eastview, Jessi Martin, a sophomore, showed me a poem that she was writing as part of a poetry unit in her English class. In this poem, Jessi wrote about herself and her experience as a teen mother. After Jessi was finished writing her poem, she shared it with me and I asked her if I could include it as part of my data. When Jessi agreed to this, I was led me to consider how the inclusion of her poem within my writing also became a site for constructing Jessi as a person—as a student, a mother, and an adolescent. I asked myself whether featuring Jessi's poem simultaneously advocated for and further reified the image of the pregnant and parenting teen. Would using Jessi's poem as a lens from which to view teen motherhood further stereotype this group of students? I posed these questions as I made the decision to include Jessi's poem as data within my study. Her poem, entitled "Just Because," is featured below:

Just Because

Just because I had a baby
Don't laugh and talk behind my back.
Don't think I can't achieve.
Don't try to please me with your make believe.

Just because I had a baby
Don't mean I have to give up my dreams.
Doesn't mean for you to stop being a friend.

Just because I had a baby
Doesn't give you a right to throw me on with the
statistics.

"displacement, transplantation, disruption, positionality, and difference" ([Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000](#)).

Just because I had a baby
Doesn't mean I'm a ho'
Don't act like I don't know.
Just because I had a baby
Means I need you more than ever.

by Jessi Martin

Jessi's poem, placed within my research, became a story that represented her. This story, told through her own words, stood as a way for me (and hopefully my readers) to make sense of Jessi's experience.

Ethnographic methods in a postmodern landscape

Ethnographers build a representation of their research site, in part, through using the stories of their participants. [Pillow's \(2004\) *Unfit Subjects*](#) began by gathering participants' stories of being a pregnant and/or parenting teen. However, Pillow eventually moved to reject using her participants' stories as the basis of her book, and eventually asserted that individual stories are often bound up in problems of representation, similar to the issues of representation cited in the questions outlined earlier in this essay. Pillow's move to address questions of representation eventually focused on analyzing "discourses,"² a methodology that she felt allowed her to operate from a space that included both the analysis of discourse and the acknowledgement of stories. In *Unfit Subjects*, Pillow acknowledges an interest in stories, but the attention throughout her book is given to tracing discourses in an effort to "identify where the discourses about teen pregnancy are being formed, how they work, and what educational opportunities these discourses open up or delimit for teen mothers" (p. 8). Pillow notes that focusing on the teen mothers' stories led her to "continually face the limits and reproductions of [her] stories" (p. 7), thus prompting her to turn her analytic lens away from the teen mother as a unit of analysis and toward the

construction of the discourses that shape and make possible the teen mother herself. Pillow also offers an explicit reason for refraining from representing the stories of teen mothers. Claiming that this group of teens are already "overrepresented and hypervisible," Pillow believes that building representations through stories may assist in reproducing stereotypical knowledge about teen mothers. She poses the question, How do we tell stories that do not easily fit into existing, hypervisible, narrative structures?

Does telling the stories of teen mothers make them "hypervisible"?

Wanda Pillow would likely weigh whether featuring Jessi Martin's poem within research makes teen motherhood "hypervisible." However, two critical ethnographers who have written about the schooling experiences of pregnant teens, [Dierdre Kelly \(2000\)](#) and [Wendy Luttrell \(2003\)](#), may view Jessi's poem in a different way. Both Kelly and Luttrell offer a theoretical rationale for focusing on the stories that individuals tell—a rationale that they feel keeps the agency of participants at the center of research. Both Kelly and Luttrell execute this theoretical position by maintaining that their research, which values the stories and voices of their participants, provides alternative visions to the myths and stereotypes that surround the image of the pregnant teen. [Wendy Luttrell's *Pregnant Bodies, Fertile Minds* \(2003\)](#), uses self-representations of the students she works with to represent them, and asserts that the students' efforts to construct themselves through their own image work and self-representations work toward the goal of providing crucial alternative visions of the pregnant and parenting teen. Jessi Martin's poem "Just Because" would fit the criteria of a self-representation and would adhere to Luttrell's mandate of centering the stories of participants.

In contemplating Wendy Luttrell's work with pregnant and parenting students, it was important for me to consider how Luttrell does not aim to create a single story from the stories she tells about her participants; rather, she recognizes that all researchers assume a normative or universal relation to truth when

² I am using the term "discourses" here in a [Foucauldian \(1972\)](#) sense, referring to historically and culturally located systems of power/ knowledge that construct subjects and their worlds. Foucault explains that discourses are "practices that systematically form the objects [and subjects] of which they speak" (p. 48).

speaking about research participants (Carspecken, 1996). These truths exist to allow people to recognize they are ideologically located. The “double crisis of representation” (Behar & Gordon, 1995) and the acknowledgement that the crisis has two roots, one in the postmodern turn and the other in the critique of the white, middle-class feminist version of women’s experiences, is clearly accounted for in Luttrell’s work. For example, Luttrell (2003) points out that she has been told that she, as a white scholar, “had no business re-representing the lives of black youth” (p. 168). Luttrell disagrees with this claim, while also clearly understanding that she cannot break free from the social and racialized world of which she is part. Not only is it her responsibility to debunk myths and stereotypes about pregnant and parenting teens, but it is also her duty to create alternative visions. It is through these alternative visions, Luttrell argues, that the process of “becoming and being made” can be explored. Luttrell’s work aligns with the tenets of “postmodern ethnography,” an approach Denzin (1997) describes as including a deep understanding of the lives of one’s participants and a contextualized reproduction of the stories told by the participants.

Luttrell’s stance as an ethnographer does not aim to make the emotional facets of her investigation invisible. Instead, it is these difficult sites of emotional knowing that facilitate the creation of multiple truths. Her ability to “ethnographically know,” in fact, relies on her emotional ties to her research and to her participants. Luttrell identifies her work as a “person-centered” approach to ethnography (p. 6). Claiming this as an “experience-near way of describing and knowing” her participants, Luttrell views experience-near knowing as promoting the goal of engaging people in talking about and reflecting upon their subjective experiences.

Dierdre Kelly, author of *Pregnant with Meaning: Teen Mothers and the Politics of Inclusive Schooling* (2000), also positions herself as a critical feminist ethnographer and speaks to the dichotomous construct of teen mothers as victims/ teen mothers as free agents. Recognizing that viewing teen mothers as victims neglects giving girls personal agency and, conversely, viewing teen mothers as free agents

neglects the recognition of the discourses that influence/ shape the girls’ subjectivities, Kelly endorses a critical feminist stance as a methodology that attends to both “agency and the lived experiences of the research participants (especially the most vulnerable); the extra-local context of research sites, including the various asymmetrical power relations; and the documentation of oppressive ideologies and practices with an eye toward envisioning more emancipatory alternatives” (pp. 8-9). Kelly views her understanding of critical feminism as inclusive of a variety of feminist approaches, including the work of multicultural, poststructuralist, socialist, and materialist feminists (the latter three she characterizes as “critical”). The position of “feminist” is emphasized in her work in order to stress her desire to scrutinize the act of “othering” the teen mother. In an effort to include the students she worked with as co-researchers, Kelly created a context where full collaboration with her research participants would be possible. However, she notes that from her previous research she knew that “public schools are not places conducive to participatory action research, particularly when the intended co-researchers are students and minors” (p. 192). Kelly understands that because of dilemmas such as these, she is not just “studying down,” a position for which she has been criticized (when she, as the White, middle-class female academic investigated the positionalities of students disadvantaged by age, gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity), she is also “studying up” (when she, as an academic, encountered difficulty with the school district with regard to allowing her research project to move forward). These more complex understandings of a researcher’s position in doing ethnography led Kelly to an understanding that “critical feminist ethnographers will collude in unequal relations of power despite our political goals to challenge and transform them” (p. 203).

Jessi Martin’s poem “Just Because” references several discourses of teen motherhood, and one might view these discourses as confining Jessi’s ability to act as a free agent. For example, as readers of her poem, we may notice that Jessi references “giving up her dreams,” “talking behind her back,” and “throwing

her on with the statistics” (lines 6, 2, and 9). All three researchers that I have featured in this essay, Dierdre Kelly, Wendy Luttrell, and Wanda Pillow, might argue that these words are not necessarily Jessi’s words as a free agent speaking, but are instead discourses at play that are articulated by Jessi. However, Jessi’s understanding of herself as a teen mom involves “talking back” to discourses as well as synthesizing them. Her critical awareness that these discourses exist and are at play within her own construction of herself is an indicator that she feels a sense of agency. Her poem, “Just Because,” is a metaphor for teen mothers’ work within the dialectic of “free agent”/ “victim.”

Throughout their work, ethnographers [Kelly \(2000\)](#) and [Luttrell \(2003\)](#) are able to capture how local technologies play a part in shaping and producing discourses. Through a dialectical relationship, these scholars are able to feature individuals’ agency and the discourses they work within and through, recognizing the tensions and problems scholars doing ethnography have recently faced. Although it has been argued that drawing attention to the narratives of pregnant and parenting teens may make these young women even more “hypervisible” ([Pillow, 2004](#)), the stories of teen mothers, as [Kelly \(2000\)](#) and [Luttrell \(2003\)](#) illustrate, are powerful tools of representation because they respond to what [Luttrell \(2003\)](#) calls “both ways” of ethnographic knowing: detachment/ analysis and being an emotional participant in what one is seeing (p. 162). [Luttrell](#) claims that this is what makes ethnographic knowing an “exemplary” kind of knowing: it takes into account personal subjectivity.

Writing within the dialectic of “both ways” of ethnographic knowing

Working within the dialectic of “both ways” of ethnographic knowing is the call for researchers who study the experiences and lives of individuals. [Dorothy Smith \(1987, 1990\)](#) has been explicit in addressing “both ways” of ethnographic knowing, and has focused on the possibility of a “dialectics of discourse and the everyday” (1990, p. 202). She

articulates this in reference to women’s “active” placement in their worlds:

It is easy to misconstrue the discourse as having an overriding power to determine the values and interpretation of women’s appearances in local settings, and see this power as essentially at the disposal of the fashion industry and media. But women are active, skilled, make choices, consider, are not fooled or foolish. Within discourse there is play and interplay. (1990, p. 202)

[Smith \(1990\)](#) understands that while discourse may shape possibilities, women as agents still have the ability to take up the possibilities in various ways. Jessi Martin’s poem, “Just Because,” articulates the interplay of “woman as agent” working within discourse and firmly situates agency as a distinct aspect of life. Her poem’s critical awareness evidences [Smith’s](#) claim that women are indeed “active, skilled, make choices, are not fooled or foolish” (p. 202).

Throughout this essay, I have worked to call attention to particular theoretical and methodological stances of scholars, including [Kelly \(2000\)](#), [Luttrell \(2003\)](#), and [Pillow \(2004\)](#), who have written about pregnant and parenting teens. The goal of my inquiry has been to more purposely position the question of “Who are you?” within an analytic framework that “best” speaks to the construction of identity within ethnographic ways of knowing. As a scholar interested in the lives and experiences of youth who are labeled “at risk,” my inquiry will no doubt lead me to more deliberate, and therefore, more ethical, representations of all youth—particularly those who are deemed to be most “at risk” of school failure.

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The View from the Whiteboard Window

by Susan Roberts

Background

About five years ago, I decided to experiment and try another approach to the usual instructor-student mid-semester evaluations for my non-traditional female students (working adults, older students in college for the first time, single mothers, retirees). These students made up about sixty percent of the writing classes I instructed on the community college level. While these evaluations served a necessary purpose and gave me a chance to discuss each student's progress on an individual level, I realized that something was missing from the discussion process.

Although the non-traditional students were responsive and ready to converse about their work in the course, I could not help but notice that another angle kept emerging time and again in our one-to-one sessions. Somehow these non-traditionals were talking about issues other than the composition course, yet these matters were inextricably linked to their performance in the writing classroom. This hidden angle, or missing factor, had to be explored. In order for the mid-semester conferences to be successful, I needed to find the link between the individual as a student and the student as a writer.

Writing view journal activity

In our next class meeting, I began the class by asking the students to take out their journal notebooks. While the students were preparing to write, I drew a picture of a large window on the whiteboard, turned to the students, and said, "This is our classroom window in our writing course. What do you see at this very moment when you look through this window at yourself and your writing?" Here are the instructions that I wrote on the board and read to the students:

1. For the first two-three minutes of this activity, think about where you are as a student and as a writer in this class.

2. Now, when you look through that imaginary window on the board, write about the view that you see of yourself and your writing.
3. Use your experiences, do an analysis, or try persuasion to develop your ideas about you and your role in writing.

While I established few guidelines for this journal activity, I did announce to the class that they could use a variety of writing strategies to cover their ideas and feelings. With such minimal guidelines given, I was worried that some of the non-traditionals might miss the point of the assignment: to let me know where they stood in the writing-learning process.

At first, the students were a bit skeptical and thought I was joking. Somewhat reluctantly, they began to write. The fifteen-minute time frame that I had envisioned for this journal assignment soon became thirty minutes, and the students had become so engrossed in the journals that many did not want to stop writing. I had to walk around the room to collect the entries, and many students were hesitant about submitting their work, asking for more time to complete the entry.

Roxanne's journal entry

Roxanne is thirty-six years old, a single mother of three, and an employee at a hotel. She is enrolled in two courses this semester: English 101 and Math 102. Here is her journal:

An "imaginary window"? Someone ought to wash the real windows here! I should know—I'm a maid in a hotel near the airport. Is this my life? Will it be my life a year from now? I sure hope not. That's why I'm here. I'm tired, the kind of bone-crushing tired you see on those tv ads for vitamins. Between three kids and my job, I have to succeed. We read an essay in here that I couldn't

put down: “Campus Racism 101.” I needed a boost, and that essay was there for me: Go to class, meet your professors, do assignments on time, don’t defeat yourself. That’s what the essay said. I could be the poster girl for Nikki Giovanni’s words when she says, “College is a little like playing grown-up.” However, I’ve got a message for Miss Nikki: College is not for grown up wannabe’s—it’s the real thing. Someone ought to tell that to her because she’s dead wrong! College is an adult world, and my writing class is right in the middle of that big bad adult world. I don’t have to prove to myself or my family why I’m here in this classroom. My little finger can answer that one. I’m not going to wash windows forever, and if being at school and writing my butt off gets me anyplace then I’ll do my best. In the hotel we had a famous writer spend two nights as part of her lecture tour. I went to hear her at a local bookstore, and she looked at me two or three times, as if she recognized me as the person who cleaned her room. Did she know me? When she said to the audience, “Any questions?”, I raised my hand and asked her, “What has writing done for you besides make you rich and famous?” She said, “I could respond humorously or seriously, but I think you want a serious answer. Writing creates worlds for me.” She didn’t explain, and I nodded and left. I couldn’t get her words out of my mind for over a week. In this class we read, write, read, write, and then do some more. After thinking about her words, I had that moment we discussed—the epiphany moment—when everything she meant (or at least I think what she meant) finally came together. Maybe what she meant is what this whole journal entry is about: writing helps you create worlds with your words. It’s not some kind of really profound idea, but that’s what I want my writing to do. I want to share my world, the world of my here and now with my readers. I’m not writing books. I’m writing ME—my observations, thoughts, reactions to what we’re reading in class. For once, I feel like my voice counts. I’m not playing some adult in college—I AM that adult going to college to make something of my life. I

may be thirty-six years old, but I finally figured out where I am in that imaginary window: I’m here, I’m learning, I’m providing for my children, and I’m a learner who’s going to make it in writing, college, and life. That author was right—writing is helping me create worlds that I understand with my words, and for me, right now in my life, that’s a momentous thought.

Discussion

In this assignment, I did not have the students read their journal entries to their workshop groups; instead, I read their work and tried to find any information that would give me some insight into the non-traditional female students’ sense of location and performance in my writing class. I hoped that I could determine a connection between their perceptions of the learning process and any interaction writing had with their personal lives.

As I began to read their journal entries before I met the students for their conferences, I was not surprised to find that many non-traditionals wrote about observations and feelings that they never had explored in their essays, response papers, journals or classroom discussions. A wealth of information was coming from a simple view out of that whiteboard window, and the writing assignment gave me far more detailed background about my female non-traditional students than they were able to discuss in a fifteen-to-twenty minute mid-semester writing conference. This journal writing assignment was an epiphany for many of the students, for almost all of them found themselves torn between the known and comfortable world of the familiar and expected, and the unfamiliar and sometimes disturbing world of college life and adulthood. As learners and writers, they understood that the window view they were being asked to describe allowed them to recognize and reconcile the tumultuous feelings they were experiencing in their overlapping worlds of friends, family, work and academics. [Kegan \(2004\)](#) saw this step in the growth process when he claimed, “Indeed, school can be a most fertile context for this transformation of consciousness into adulthood” (p. 300). The mid-semester journal assignment achieved the goal I had

hoped for: It linked past and present, beliefs and attitudes, dreams and realities, and adolescence and adulthood all in an intense writing scenario.

Conclusion

The view from the window assignment expanded my horizons as a writing instructor and opened my non-traditional female students' eyes as learners. We all discovered invaluable information about directions in life, goals, past experiences, present perceptions, and the interplay of these factors with the writing-learning process. By using a simple visual—a drawing of a window—to stimulate creative and critical thinking, I found new meaning in the writing process. [Macrorie \(1970\)](#) noted in *Telling Writing*, “A journal is a place for confusion and certainty, for the half-formed and the completed” (p. 141). In many ways, his words describe my non-traditional female students' lives as individuals and writers. [Edward White \(2007\)](#) supported this idea of journal writing as a key unlocking the distinct identities of student and writer in “Helping Students Do Well On Writing Assignments” when he emphasized, “For many of our students, this use of writing to internalize and understand is novel and difficult; it also turns out to be profoundly instructive, sometimes even transformative” (p. 35).

A simple journal exercise on which I had planned to spend no more than fifteen minutes had expanded itself into a thirty-minute assignment that gave me mid-semester knowledge far beyond the typical “Well, you’ve done four essays, six response papers, and eight journals so far this semester, and let’s take a look at your drafts, workshop material, revisions and other assignments. What do you have to tell me about your work?” conference time dialogue that characterizes so many of these appointments. Now, I give this visual window journal assignment a week before I have mid-conferences with my writing students. Through this deceptively basic journal entry, I have recognized that the view from that whiteboard window illuminates not only the female non-traditional learners behind the writing but also the writers at work in a highly personal and ever changing world that characterizes the academic environment.

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Peaches

by Lynne Viti

We were pretty good girls, never in trouble for anything more than a halfhearted job washing the dinner dishes or taking out the trash cans for the weekly pickup. It was late August, and Sue, Maria and I were about to start our junior year at Seton. I had passed my driver's test in June. Sue could drive, but on this particular night, her parents had revoked her driving privileges for two more weeks for some minor infraction. Her father had been a military man, and he liked to run his family like the Army. School started in a week, and I was determined to make the most of the summer's end. I left my family's station wagon parked in front of Sue's house on Northwood Drive, wedging it between a couple of her neighbor's cars. Sue grabbed her house key and called down to her mother who was ironing in the basement, "Back later, Ma." We walked out the kitchen door, past the trash cans at the end of the cement walk, out the gate and down the alley to Maria's.

Mrs. Selig opened the door. Graying, stern and hard of hearing, she never wore makeup. She always made me feel a little on edge, as if my manners weren't good enough for her. On this particular evening she wore an apron spattered with shards of red and yellow fruit, sweet and fragrant. For a change, Mrs. Selig smiled a little, poking her head into the living room where we stood looking for Maria. "Girls, I hope you like peaches. Come in—we're just getting ready for freezing them."

Peaches lay everywhere. Small, ripe, fragrant red-flecked golden fruit was piled up on the counter and table, in plastic containers and china bowls, on the floor in a bushel basket. Maria had pulled her hair back into a ponytail and pinned it under so it looked like some kind of French hairdo, only half done up. For a few minutes Sue and I just stood there and watched her slice peaches and press them neatly into a square plastic container. A long flat peach cake still in its baking pan cooled on a rack on the Formica table, next to bowls of peaches. Mrs. Selig peeled fruit after fruit. After she skinned each one, she wiped her hands on her apron.

"I'll finish up," Maria said to her mother. She flashed me a look. "Meg and Sue can help."

Maria's mother took off her apron and folded it carefully over the back of a chair. She rinsed her hands under the faucet and said, "Just be sure you wipe off all those counters, hon, so I don't feel anything sticky when I come in to pack your father's lunch for tomorrow." She strode off towards the living room and we heard her switch on the TV.

"Did you bring the money?" Maria asked me.

"Right here," I said. I patted the front pocket of my shorts.

"How much?"

"Fifty," I said, reaching into my pocket and pulling out two twenties and a ten, and laying them on the table next to the peach cake. "Enough for all of us and more."

"More is good," said Sue. "We can always sell what we don't want."

“You want to walk down there, or what?” Maria asked.

“Let’s drive,” Sue said.

“No way—” I was so paranoid. “If anything ever happened to my dad’s car—that neighborhood—”

“So what are we gonna do, take the damn bus?” Sue asked. It was pretty obvious how stupid that idea was.

“Very funny, Miss Maria,” I said.

“Let’s call Bill Nash and make him take us,” said Maria.

“Right. Mr. College Boy is gonna drive us down to Thirty-Third Street,” I snorted. “Like in what, his mother’s Dodge Dart with the push buttons?”

“Who cares if his car is queer? He’s cute,” Maria insisted. “Let’s call him.”

“Let’s walk,” said Sue, “Bill’s so boring.”

“You just hate him because he never asked you out, Sue,” I said. “Not that your mom would let you go out with a guy in a car yet.” He’d never asked me out either, but I wasn’t going to let that stop me from giving Sue a hard time. She gave me a pissed off look, but she didn’t say anything, because she knew I was right.

“Why don’t we get your car, you drive us, you drop Maria and me off at Thirty-third Street and you wait in the car for us?” Sue looked at me. “No big deal, Meggy. It would take about ten minutes.”

I hesitated. It was only seven, and it would be light for a while yet. Where we were headed wasn’t such a great neighborhood, especially after dark, but we had plenty of time to get down there and back. And the last thing in the world I wanted to do was call Bill Nash for a ride anywhere. It wasn’t that I didn’t like him. On the contrary, I’d had a thing for him since the beginning of tenth grade, when I saw him in a Calvert Hall play. He was the guy constantly stumbling in drunk and falling down in “You Can’t Take It With You.” The play was stupid and I didn’t remember a thing about it except this tall boy with rosy cheeks and a shock of brown hair, crashing to the floor and evoking waves of laughter from the girls. Now he was in college, and I wondered if he had a girlfriend. Probably some older girl. There was no way he’d be interested in a high school junior.

“We going or not?” Sue asked. “I need a smoke. Now.” Maria’s parents didn’t allow smoking in the house—at least not for us. It was fine for the parents to smoke, of course. “Let’s get out of here,” Sue whined.

“Fine. I’ll drive,” I said. The fan in Maria’s kitchen was humming loudly. It would be good to have some fun for a change. The whole summer had been nothing but boring—cashiering at the market, mowing the lawn, driving around at night with my girlfriends wishing we had someplace to go—a party, maybe to D.C. where it was legal to drink if you were eighteen, maybe get to hang out with some older guys. But all we’d had so far was the movies and if we were lucky, someone with a house on the shore invited us down overnight. Once Wanda Barber had us down to a cookout at her family’s summer place on the Severn, but we only put up with her because at school she kept trying to sit with us at our lunch table. Eventually, we just caved in and Wanda started thinking she was one of us. Needless to say, she wasn’t.

“I have to ask if I can go out tonight,” Maria said. She crossed her fingers and held them up. Sue tapped her foot loudly and sighed as Maria wiped her hands, threw the towel down onto the kitchen table, and walked into the living room.

“Let’s wait on the back steps,” Sue said. “I bet her mom says no way.” She pulled a pack of cigarettes out of her shorts pocket and shook one out. “You want one?” She opened the door for me very quietly and we sat down on the concrete stoop.

“Sure,” I said. I wasn’t a regular smoker, but sometimes it just felt right to have one. Sue pulled out a silver lighter, lit my cigarette and then hers. She inhaled and started blowing smoke rings. Fully aware that I’d not yet mastered that skill, I took a long menthol drag and just blew it out slowly.

“Nice lighter,” I said. “Where’s it from?”

“I copped it from my sister,” Sue said. Her sister was in college. She had a summer job waitressing in Ocean City and had left most of her good stuff at home in the room they shared. “I have to put it back before she gets home next week.”

“Don’t lose it or she’ll kill you,” I said. Catherine was a notorious bitch, very particular about her possessions, especially the expensive gifts she got from boyfriends, of which she had many.

“Fat chance,” Sue answered. “I have the goods on her—she and her friends had a keg party when my parents went away that weekend and I helped her clean up after—so now I can use all her stuff and she can’t stop me.”

Just then, Maria practically ran out her back door. She grabbed each of us by the wrist and pulled us down the narrow concrete walk through the back gate. Letting go of us for a moment, she swung the metal gate back hard behind her to close it tight. “She is so damned annoying,” she said, looking back over her shoulder. She’d unpinned her hair and it was loose now, down past her shoulders. Her tanned face was still wet from when she’d just splashed water on it. “Get a move on, you two,” she laughed, and she bumped her hip lightly, first against me, then against Sue. “I made parole, but the Queen says I have to be home by ten-thirty.”

“Poor kid,” I said. “My curfew’s midnight.”

We started singing together as we walked three abreast down the alley: “Nowhere to run, baby, nowhere to hide. Got nowhere to run, baby . . . I know you’re no good for me . . .” The singing ended abruptly as we dissolved into laughter, about, it seemed, nothing. Perspiration ran down my face and I could feel it drip right down into the front of my sleeveless top. My hair, which I had worked so hard at straightening that afternoon, was frizzing. I pulled it back as flat as I could under my headband, trying to look as cool as I thought Maria did.

We cut through the end of the alleyway and onto Northwood Drive. As we walked, we saw kids everywhere, it seemed—little kids out with empty mayonnaise jars, holes poked into the metal tops. They were running over front lawns, squealing and catching lightning bugs. On the corner, girls and boys were lining up at the curb by the white Good Humor truck. The ice cream man, a short, dark guy dressed in whites with a change-maker at his

belt, was pulling popsicles and rockets from the freezer of the truck. I watched the dry ice curl up and escape the open compartment at the back of the truck.

“Want a popsicle?” Sue said. “I might.”

“We have to go,” I said. “The guy told me he’d only be there till eight, and he might not even stay that late.”

“The guy” was someone called Steve. A girl who lived down my block, Dodie Kozak, had told me about him. I used to ride bikes and play hopscotch with Dodie when we were back in grade school, but now she went to the Vo-Tech and ran with a tougher crowd. At the bus stop, though, we would talk about boys, and makeup. She was going to be a beautician, and she always carried this weird shiny plastic case with all her supplies like curlers, end papers for perms, special equipment that hairdressers used. For several weeks while we waited for the bus, we talked about where it was easy to buy beer, how to get fake i.d.s, and where to find some diet pills and grass. She knew a lot about all this, and I knew almost nothing, but I figured I could get some good leads from her. One day she wrote down Steve’s phone number down for me on a scrap of paper torn from the top of a magazine—just his first name and a number. Then she gave me some advice. “This is where you want to go for your grass, you know, maryjane,” she whispered to me one afternoon as we both sat waiting for the bus to take us to work. “Down near the Waverly Theatre is where he hangs out. He’s not a sleaze, he won’t rat you out, and he’s nice. And sort of cute, for an older guy,” she had added. Her express bus had pulled up just then as she handed me the piece of paper, filled with her fat round handwriting, all the i’s dotted with circles. She stepped up to the token box, dropped in her fifteen cents, and looked back at me over her shoulder for a split second. Almost scaggy-looking, I had thought—she had really light teased blond hair, white lipstick, and too much black eyeliner. But on her, it looked almost cool. She was tall and thin and knew how to carry it off. She knew that everyone else knew it, too.

“Hey, daydreamer, I have dibs on the death seat,” Sue said. She opened the passenger door of my car and climbed in.

“Fine with me, age before beauty.” Maria slid into the back seat. “Thirty-third and Greenmount, driver,” she said, giggling.

“Are you sure we want to do this?” I asked.

“Are you turning chicken on us?” Sue said.

“No way,” I said, as I turned the key and pulled out onto the street. Sue switched on the radio and started fooling with the dial.

The street was quiet when we arrived on the block where Steve had said to meet him. I had called him from a payphone earlier that day. “Bring cash, fifty bucks minimum,” he said when I phoned him. “You have to take my word for it, you don’t get to try the stuff out first,” he’d told me. “And if anyone asks, you don’t know me.”

“See if you can see number 505,” I asked. Sue rolled down her window and peered out.

“This is the six hundred block, so one more block west. Are you getting a little weirded out? Don’t, Meg.”

I maneuvered the station wagon into a parking place, not a legal one though, near a fire hydrant. “Should we get out and wait for this guy, or stay in the car?” Maria asked.

“Maria, don’t be stupid, we stay here. This part of town isn’t the best place to be, even if it’s still daylight,” Sue said.

“Looks fine to me,” retorted Maria.

“You are so damned naïve,” I said. “Stay here, you two. Let me just get out and check if this guy’s around.”

Just then the front door of one of the houses flipped open fast, and out walked a guy, older than us but not as old as our parents. I’d say he was maybe thirty. He had on jeans and a dark blue pocket t- shirt, with a pack of cigarettes in the pocket. Winstons, I think, or Marlboros, a red and white package.

“Hey. You Meg?” he called down to me from the doorway. He had short dirty-blond hair and blue eyes, and very strange little teeth.

“That’s me.”

“You girls want to come in for a sec?” he asked.

I turned to Sue and Maria. Maria had almost a frozen expression on her face, but was giving me a look as if to say, No way.

“Well,” I hesitated.

“Girls, come on up. I need a few minutes to get it all together for you is all.”

He seemed sincere enough, but I didn’t know if we should go in. I ticked off the pluses and minuses: bad neighborhood; a guy we didn’t really know; no information about who was in the apartment with him. Plus we were obviously about to engage in a criminal activity – buying drugs. “No, thanks,” I said, smiling weakly. “We’ll just wait here.”

“Have it your way, babe,” he said, and disappeared into the apartment.

“Hey, Meg, I’m gonna go buy some beer,” Sue said.

“Yeah, right,” I said. “At your age, sure. Good luck.”

“No, really,” Sue was annoyed. She waved a card she had pulled out of her back pocket, a Delaware driver’s license. “I have I.D.”

This was something new. “From where?”

“Get out,” said Maria. “What does it say?”

“Mary Ellen Steele, 4015 Walnut Avenue, Wilmington,” Sue read. “One of my sister’s many fakes.”

“Sue, we don’t need beer,” Maria said. “What we came for is better. Anyway, we don’t need them both, that’s for sure.”

“It’s my car,” I said. “Wait right here.”

“Hey! Get up here, Meg!” The guy was back at the screen door of his place, calling down to me sort of softly, so I could barely hear what he was saying. “You coming up to do this or not? Who else is coming with you?” He smiled. I noticed for the first time that he had a green tattoo, maybe a gargoyle, on his forearm. His jeans were tight and dirty, with thin lines of grime running horizontally across his thighs.

I glanced over at Sue and Maria. “Who’s coming?” Neither of them said a thing. Sue jerked her chin up and over towards the porch where Steve was standing.

“I am,” I said loud enough for him to hear me. “Lock all the doors,” I told Sue. “Get in the driver’s seat, keep the keys in the ignition, be ready.” She got out of the car on the curb

side, locked the door, then walked around to the driver's side and slid in behind the wheel. She leaned over and rolled down the front passenger window, and I tossed in the keys. "Be right back," I said. My shorts felt like they were riding up, so I tugged them down as inconspicuously as I could. I adjusted my hair again under my headband, pulling it back tight from my forehead.

I walked fast up the steps to the porch, and stopped a couple of feet away from the front door. Steve had just lit a cigarette, and taking a long drag on it, he said quietly, "How much money you bring?"

"Fifty," I said.

"Lemme see it," he said in a low voice.

"Where's the stuff?" I asked.

"Don't you worry about that, lemme see the money," he replied. He started to move towards me a bit, letting the screen door smack shut behind him. From the inside of the house I could hear a radio playing music, country music.

"Okay." I started to reach into my pocket. "Wait a second, Steve—" "I started to say.

"I ain't Steve," the man said quietly. "Now come here and give me the money."

My heart began to beat faster now. "You're not Steve?" I said. "Who are you, then?"

"Just give me the money," he said. "And get the hell out of here. Now."

My hand stayed in my pocket, and I froze. He reached over and grabbed my elbow with one hand, squeezing it hard, while the other hand seemed to go into his back pocket. My heart started beating faster, the noise rising in my throat, then in my head.

I jerked my elbow away, and surprisingly, he was so unsteady on his feet that I easily moved backwards a few steps and started for the stairs, while he stood there, a bit dazed. "Get up here!" he said in a flat voice, as I felt my foot touch the top step and I tried to propel myself down. "I got what you came for." He started down the steps after me. I nearly tripped across the sidewalk. I pounded on the passenger door window until Sue leaned over and pulled up the door lock. "Drive!" I screamed, as I got into the car. "Drive! He's coming! Drive, you idiot!"

Without a word, Sue started up the car and pulled out onto the street, tires squealing. We rode in silence—no radio, no talking, my heart still pounding. I wound down the window halfway and heard that strange whooshing sound as we quickly rode past parked cars, one after another.

"You okay, Meg?" said Maria quietly, from the back seat.

"Yeah, I guess," I said. "No, actually, I'm not."

"What happened, he try something?" Sue asked.

"I don't know. It was strange. He didn't seem to have the stuff. God, he was so disgusting—"

"You should be more—we should be more careful," Maria said. "If my mother knew I was down here—"

"Let's leave your mother out of this," I said.

Maria lit a Newport, took a drag, and handed it to me. "Here, you need this," she said.

“Thanks,” I sucked in the menthol smoke and exhaled slowly. “Maybe Dodie Kozak set the whole thing up, that scag.”

“You really think she might have?” said Sue. “You’re okay, aren’t you? That guy was a jerk. How old you think he was, Meggy?”

“Old. Maybe thirty?”

We began to giggle and then we couldn’t stop. “Turn on the radio,” I said, when we finally got quiet. “Let’s go back to someone’s house and just watch television.” Neither of them said a word. We drove on, past Memorial Stadium and onto the boulevard heading north.

When we were a few blocks away from Sue’s, she said, “I’d better pull over and let you take the wheel. My father will ground me for another month if he catches me driving.”

“Want to drive by Bill Nash’s house?” Maria asked. “His mother works nights.”

“What was that guy trying to do, anyway?” Sue asked.

“I don’t know, take our money, I guess,” I said morosely. “Maybe something worse. Forget it, Sue. I don’t want to talk about it. Let’s go by Bill’s.”

Sue parked the car as near to Bill’s house as she could, considering the cars were bumper to bumper all along the block. We rang the doorbell. Bill appeared, tall and smiling. He wore cut-off jeans and a sleeveless t-shirt from his old high school. “Ladies,” he said, as though he’d expected us, “Come in. Nothing like company on a hot and humid August night in the city. *Mi casa es su casa*, as they say. Please, join me.”

He led us through his house, empty of adults and siblings, out to the back stoop. We sat there for a couple hours drinking beer, smoking Marlboros and listening to the top forty hits on the radio, which Bill had set in the kitchen window facing out towards the back yard. Sue and Maria sat on the lowest step, swigging from cans of Budweiser and looking up at the darkening sky. Clutching their jars of lightning bugs, the last of the neighborhood children were called in when the street lights came on. Bill and I started to sing along to the radio, and he slipped his arm around my shoulders. Then the stars came out, and the cicadas began their rising song.

Lynne Viti teaches in the Writing Program at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, where her courses focus on legal studies, law and film and media studies. A native of Baltimore, she is currently working on an extended nonfiction project about divorce in early twentieth century Maryland.

The Pea Princess: A Vignette of the “Era of Enlightenment”

by Barbara Dreher

Katrin heard it in the night—cloud rumbles and rain! But in the hour before dawn she was wakened again to a gushing downpour. It submerged all other sounds...no cock’s crow, no restless stamping in the stables, no querulous lowing from the cattle.

It was lucky for the barnyard servants who snuggled back into bed for a few more minutes of rest. No overseer would fault them. But the household servants had to keep their schedule. They dashed across the deeply puddled courtyard to tend the master’s kitchen, larder, nursery, bath, sleeprooms, and great hall. The senior servants had learned intuitively that the higher men rose in social circles, the more they distanced themselves from the natural life. Only the animals adapted themselves to the rhythm of seasons without question or complaint.

Katrin herself wished to avoid the oncoming day. She closed her eyes and took slow breaths to calm the queasiness in her gullet. How could she contrive to avoid the prince for another day?

Constantine’s touch had become repellent and not just because of her current condition. With each child his arrogance had grown. Each boy was destined to be the fighter who would regain his lands for him. Perhaps his gentle way during their short courtship was merely mourning over his wartime losses. No matter with whom he conspired to stop Napoleon’s advance, each ally betrayed him. Time and again his property was sacrificed to win an uneasy peace and keep the line of battle away from stronger Palitinate territories.

Hearing his whiny voice made Katrin more tired and irritated than usual. How could she face the day? There was no pea planted under the mattress of her bed. There was no wicked mother-in-law contriving to undo her dreams. The pea was in her belly – her womb to be exact. It was her doom, her destiny, and her hope. She would nurture it any way she could.

As she bathed Katrin formulated her plan for the day. Submitting to gloom was not her nature. What was the point of past suffering if she couldn’t twist it into a brighter tomorrow?

When the prince came into her room she gave him an adoring smile, “You look fine today. Did you have a good rest?”

“Cursed rain! It kept me awake.”

“Me, too,” she murmured knowing he was too self-involved to concern himself with the feelings of others.

“I planned to go riding, but now the trails are soaked.”

“What if you go toward the mountain? The uplands drain quickly.”

“That’s not what I planned. Besides the tree branches are sodden and sprinkle cold water down my back.”

“What a shame!”

Katrin continued to be amazed at his childishness. It must be the mark of a “privileged” upbringing. Inspiration came to her and she snatched up a crocheted shawl. “How do you like this? I thought I’d wear it when the painter comes.” She twirled around.

“Who?”

“The portrait painter.”

“Oh. That does not concern you . . . only men in the royal line. Surely your mother was a Jewess by the way you like to adorn yourself in silk and jewels.”

“More likely she was a gypsy. She didn’t live long enough for me to know, “she snapped. She remembered only amber hair and a singing voice that flowed like amber. She retreated to her major goal. “You belong in the Great Hall with the others.”

“Definitely! But the sitting is not today. I’ve set the schedule for the end of the week.”

“Oh . . . Well, that was wise because it gives you time to decide what to wear.”

“Don’t be foolish! You know I have to wear the same old thing. I can’t afford a new waistcoat.” His lips leveled in a pout and he slipped his left hand under the front opening of his hunting tunic in the well-known Napoleonic pose. She marveled again at his admiration for the military genius who had victimized him.

“Why is it my curse to be saddled with the weakness of my forebears?”

Katrin had heard it all before. Constantin never admitted that his lands were not won in battle, but acquired by marriages. Naïve as she had been, she never thought to investigate the settlements in his earlier marriages . . . the first, a princess, then a countess. Or was it the reverse . . . the countess having brought enough property that he could vie for a princess the second time around.

“What a pity . . . not your fault,” she murmured as her mind searched for an alternative way to keep him occupied.

“Yes, but I have to suffer now.”

“Crown Prince Nicholas Otto was the only one to make the family proud. By the way, where is his waistcoat? The decorated one?”

“I don’t know . . . somewhere.”

“In the clothes press perhaps. The new maid could be sent to search for it.”

“Don’t bother.”

“Or send Old Ilse . . . she knows which coat shows the badges of office.”

“No. I can’t wear Otto’s coat.”

“Perhaps not . . . you are not heavy like he was. But the buttons could be moved.”

“Wouldn’t that show?”

“No, not when making the coat trimmer. If it were widened there would be a fade line.” It seemed logical and she sensed victory.

“Well, but I can’t”

“Just try it on for size,” she tried not to seem too eager. Persuasion was such a demanding art.

“No, I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m too tall.”

“Oh, what a shame. I always liked that color. Deep blue brings out your eyes.”

“Can’t be helped.”

“A competent tailor could add length by taking out the shoulder seam and inserting a gold stripe.” He made no facile response, so she continued, “If you demand it and Ilse supervises, the coat could be ready for the first sitting.”

He squirmed around; a furrow of concentration formed on his brow. She dared not interrupt because advice from her so often set off opposition.

“I’ve got things to do,” he declared and stomped off. As he descended the staircase she heard him call “Ilse!”

Katrin smiled with satisfaction. She’d won peace at last.

The prince was occupied in preparations for a few days and then for hours, while the artist worked. Katrin attended only once, because she had so much difficulty stifling her irritation at the prince’s petty bullying of the painter. He had to have his way in every detail and the final portrait revealed his imperious nature.

Once framed the portrait was hung in the Great Hall. It showed the upper torso of a stern-faced man. His black hair was combed to frame his rugged features. His left arm rested in his tunic. Constantine’s personal vanity had tricked him into a veritable replica of Napoleon . . . his nemesis and his hero.

Katrin was embarrassed, but remained serene. She had won more time for her little sweet pea to settle into a safe position in her incubator. This child (boy or girl) she would raise to her own standards of nobility.

Barbara Dreher is retired professor of Communications at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. She has published two books dealing with Communication Problems of the Elderly with Springer, Inc. in New York City. Recently she became an adjunct at Indiana University East. Her current project is historical fiction, based on research into the effects of Napoleon’s incursions into the Rhine Palatinate area of Germany.

Acceptance Speech for the Rewey Belle Inglis Award, November 2008

Nancy McCracken

Thank you to my sisters in WILLA and to all those good women and men in our profession who have made my work in English Education possible for nearly forty years. In accepting the Rewey Belle Inglis Award, I want to share a brief story with you.

Twenty-four years ago, while browsing a used bookstore and avoiding writing my dissertation, I happened upon a battered copy of a book by the late Tillie Olsen. In this wonderful little book, entitled *Silences*, Olsen explores why it is so hard to break into written voice, and why, even having done so successfully once, so few authors venture into print a second time. As a member of the early feminist wave that claimed we could “do it all” without breaking a sweat (or—worse—breaking into tears), I was caught off guard when I found myself, that summer, a published author, a wife and mom, and a pioneering, untenured college Writing Center Director, unable to face the daily writing task I’d earlier set for myself with genuine relish. Tillie Olsen’s was the first voice I heard telling me that in struggling with my own silences I was in very good company—that there were even stronger forces at work in the world than Virginia Woolf’s “angel of the house,” forces that could, and often did, silence women writers like me.

Years later, my dissertation long since finished, and a treasured line of successful English Education advisees graduated, I finally had a chance to meet Tillie Olsen in person. When my turn came in the line after her talk, I put out my hand to her and said, “Thank you, Tillie. You saved my life.” She drew me in close to her and answered me with the kindest of eyes, “Well, that’s what we do, isn’t it. We save each other’s lives.”

I believe this is the true mission that guides our work as English Educators, and today I am confident

that my brilliant, passionate younger colleagues will continue to tend that mission fiercely. This will mean speaking up at awkward times—that’s what it has often meant for me. It will mean, for example, objecting when educational leaders at home here in NCTE, as in the most recent issue of the *Council Chronicle* (November 2006), proclaim along with The Alliance for Excellent Education (AEE, 2002) that our chief mission as educators is fostering “prosperity in the global economy,” and that thus our chief reform in Middle Schools should be greater focus on “College Prep.” When the lives of young girls and boys are as at risk from poverty, prejudice, crime, and indifference, even death by murder or suicide, as at any time in our history, we remember out loud and in print that what we are doing first in our work among teachers and schoolchildren (before raising test scores and economic prosperity) is saving lives: the lives of our children, and of one another, through our networks of care and shared work such as that exemplified by NCTE, CEE, and the Women in Literacy and Life Assembly.

The Women in Literacy and Life Assembly
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