
An Invitation

Writing on a
cold, cold day

Writing on a cold, cold day: an invitation to pause and re-make cultural imaginaries

In January of 2015, one brutal winter in the Northeast, 11 tenth-grade multimedia students from a local high school arrived to spend the day on the UMass Amherst campus. The visit was part of a project that seeks to expand learning opportunities through new literacies, information and communication technologies and culturally responsive pedagogies. The day began with breakfast followed by a writing session at the Integrated Learning Center. Part of the session's objective was to complete the draft of a free-verse poem that students had been assigned to start the week before. Time was allotted for peer feedback, revision and shareout.

The writing session was followed by a campus tour (yes, on this snowy day), which included the W.E.B. Du Bois Library, Murray D. Lincoln Campus Center, Student Union and academic classrooms and lecture halls with actual classes in session (plate 1). Soon after the tour, lunch was provided in the food court called the Blue Wall. High school students co-mingled in this open area and experienced campus life with undergraduate and graduate students, along with faculty and staff also eating their lunch. Immediately following this was some "down" time in the lower level of the building with lounge chairs and benches. Students revisited their written poems on their own or in pairs and practiced delivering them for the recording session at the radio station several feet away. We had about an hour and a half left in the day before students were to head back to their high school on a school-sponsored bus driven by their teacher.

What happened that day was instructive.

There were convergences of entangled lives. There were cultural imaginaries in the making. There were various instances of playing out different versions of self, different ways of being, different possibilities of what it is like to belong neither here nor there. Just present. In the moment(s). The cultures and the imaginaries in these moments as threaded by a creative writing exercise and the various activities throughout the campus tour enabled connections in a particular shared space. The connections prompted new experiences and new ideas that otherwise would have

The description and images shared here were made possible by tenth-grade students and their teacher at Poly High School (pseudonym). The author thanks them for allowing her to participate in their classroom space. A collaboration was established in the fall semester of 2014 as part of ongoing research that examines possible school-community connections.

At the writing of this piece, the news media have been reporting on several incidents of gun violence, police brutality and protests against racism and structural inequities in light of the Black Lives Matter Movement. The gravity of social suffering, particularly black suffering, had reverberated across the USA and the world. I believe the poem featured here, "In Silence No Longer", reflects (prophetically) the desires and possible futures that perhaps can lead us to a different path. It is but one snapshot from the perspective of a young person of what and how things could be.

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467

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Plate 1.
View from the
W.E.B. Du Bois
Library



remained obscured. The connections became nodes for new(er) understandings about writing, cultural production and education that are important for continuing the dialogue about shaping possible futures. Often, it is through such connections where social actors, including youth and adults, construct and exchange narratives to re-image and re-imagine the world for what it could be.

What happened that day was, to say the least, revelatory.

To launch the morning writing session, I began with introductory remarks that focused on the importance of writing and the various ritualistic ways a writer writes, especially in today's digital era. I mentioned different methods of sharing one's work – in written, oral, performative or multimodal forms. It was not a surprise when I asked students to take out their work; they all either grabbed their backpacks to retrieve their notebooks, reached into their pockets for folded up papers or unlocked their smart phones or mini-tablets.

As a reminder of why writing matters, I prompted students with the following:

If you had the world's ear, what would you say? What is so important that you want to share with the world? What would you as a young person say? What would it sound like? Why should anyone care?

It was the same prompt from two weeks ago when we initiated a classroom discussion about how there is so much negative stuff and not enough positive stuff in the news media and in everyday conversations (even though positive things happen all the time). Some students identified the proliferation of violence and the gravity of suffering and

loss because of it. Other students provided balance by noting the necessity of love and the significance of family in one's life.

The narratives struck a chord. Students were sharing some very compelling realities. Upon hearing what students had to say, I recalled a piece by Tuck (2009) calling for a suspension of damage and pain-centered narratives in educational research because such narratives often reinforce deficit views that already dominate mainstream discourses about youth, communities of color and historically marginalized groups. And here we were, with students guiding the conversation about what they would say to the world if given a chance. It was a unique learning moment to create space in the classroom to identify what students' deemed as topics of importance. Yet, at the same time, there was an air of contradiction.

I had to pause and think about what and who the space is for. That learning moment was a window into the lived experiences of the young people in that space, and they were privileging me and the teacher and several graduate student assistants to take part in it. As a pedagogical consequence, I had to be doubly cognizant of what the narratives entailed because we would later have an opportunity to reconstruct those narratives into written poems and audio recordings.

In that same week, students and I also discussed spoken word poetry and cultural venues in the local community that held open-mic events, particularly geared toward youth. Some of them had never recited poems in public. Some were excited about the possibilities of sharing their work beyond the high school classroom.



Plate 2.
Recording inside the
radio station

So, on that cold winter day, students arrived at the UMass Amherst campus, and they were ready. Many of them seemed excited about not being in school and doing something completely different from a regular school day. In the morning writing session, and later in the radio station (plate 2), students delivered poems about family members and the strength in familial relationships that sustains them, symbolic and structural violence they have witnessed, suffering and loss they have experienced and evoking memories of loved ones to welcome a future with love and dignity. Once again, I had to pause. It was one thing to share these poems; it was another to privilege the university and an unknown public audience, outside the space we had created, to articulate very personal experiences that could result in calcifying deficit views.

At this juncture, questions surfaced. Where is the place for healing, for remembering, for desire, for survivance (Dillard, 2012; Ginwright, 2010; Tuck, 2009; Vizenor, 2008)? What spaces of possibility can be created to remake cultural imaginaries whereby educators interested in youth literacies and social justice are pedagogically oriented toward cultural transformations (Jocson, 2013)? What would pausing and rethinking education mean for shaping acts of futurity, in our own lives and in the lives of our students (Patel, 2016)? What kind of love and collective struggle would it take to shape possible futures (Kelley, 2016)? What kind of intellectual subversiveness would it take within the Undercommons (Harney and Moten, 2013), especially for those doing and penning educational research? Because nothing is certain. And nothing is ever easy when processes of learning, writing and introspection involve questioning what we do not yet know.

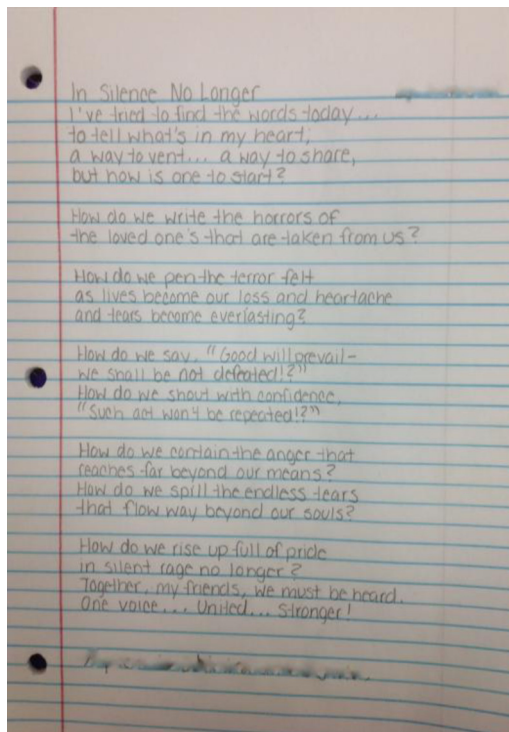


Plate 3.
Poem in its original
format

Featured here (plate 3) is a poem from the morning writing session that dares to ask what *could* be and what *ought* to be.

Inside the radio station, Chris Tinson, a professor of Africana Studies at Hampshire College and cohost of TRGGR (a radio talk show), worked with students in groups of three or four. Because the room was small, I, along with the teacher, stayed outside with other students as they prepared for the recording. All 11 students participated.

At the conclusion of the campus visit, students huddled outside the radio station for a debrief and for thanking each other for the sharing that had just occurred. Then the group trekked the salted pathways back toward the parking lot to board the bus and return to school.

More snow fell that day, signaling a fresh canvas and a tomorrow not yet promised.

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