Voices in Vulnerability: Experiential Learning in Pedagogy and Curriculum

A Collaborative Writing Project by Cal State LA Teacher-Scholars

Abstract: Our stories matter. In this collection, six Cal State LA educators draw from personal testimonies, ancestral histories, classroom experiences, and justice-focused critical theories to advance a pedagogy of radical openness and mindful positionality. Asserting the need for affective, embodied connections to academic work, these essays call into question the value of objectivity practices and non-emotive scholarly performances, situating these higher education traditions within cultures of privilege, exclusion, and suppression. Together, the authors consider questions connected to our contemporary experience of teaching and learning. How do we coauthor ourselves into our scholarship? What transgressions do we commit by revealing ourselves in our work? How do purposeful acts of vulnerability empower us with deeper critical insights? By repositioning the starting point for academic inquiry within the stories that shape us, these essays invite deeper and more personally meaningful engagement with our areas of study and stronger connections between ourselves, our students, and our communities.

Validating the Personal: An Entrance into Academic Scholarship

Amy Nicole Robb

As instructors, we are endowed with the responsibility of guiding our students' academic scholarship. The discoveries and criticisms their voices explore act as an entrance into a vibrant, living conversation. Kenneth Burke's parlor metaphor[1] flashes cinematic community experiences into the often isolating spaces of individual academic research, scholarship, and writing. The warmth of this metaphor of a communal dinner party parlor entrance allows scholars a permanent state of engaged participatory anticipation. Once students work through these ideas, they learn to develop arguments that bounce between other critical voices. Their unique insights synthesize various ideas from various texts, a lively, moving community on its own.

But as interactive as the parlor metaphor may seem, the idea of entering into the conversation places scholars, especially early developmental scholars, as satellites in a constant, rotating orbit outside of the central discussion. While arguments and conceits may cross the paths of others' critiques through quote integration and close reading from the author, the beauty of the unique academic voice is left parallel to the original work or argument, never fully intersecting the central locus. Early college writers are still fresh with learning to navigate their own ideas and critical voices, tip-toeing their way into presenting themselves within standardized academic expectations. What if, instead, we also offer our students an invitation into critical scholarship that insists on directly entering the center of the discussion too? This grants writers an opportunity to validate their own perspective and writing voice, an offering of personal poetic interpretation of the primary themes of their scholarship, in order to submit to a larger discovery from within it.

[1] "Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar" (Burke 134).

As an older, returning student in my BA and MA programs, I often struggled with finding opportunities to highlight my own perspective into my academic writing. I constantly shifted between anxiety and feelings of ineptitude watching the goals of my younger cohorts manifest effortlessly into actualized, successful scholarly and creative insight. I would hold myself guarded and offer gestures of mimicry to their bursts of youthful wisdom. I found that when I separated myself completely from my own scholarly arguments in an attempt to reach those same goals prescriptively and objectively as my fellow cohorts had done, it felt as if my writing voice projected a false alternate version of authority. One professor even described my work as if I was waving a beautiful, velvet cloak in front of the reader, a lovely distraction from having nothing of substance to say.

Once I became a graduate student and learned to negotiate the "rules" of proper academic writing, I reclaimed my voice's authority by learning to place myself on the page as my own signature entrance into the argument and discovery of scholarship. I utilized these skills and boundary pushes in an effort to truly own my voice. I took ownership of my final culminating graduate thesis by reframing the genre of "academic journal article" into a personal ficto/critical meditation through the intimate lens of motherhood.[2] The project felt incredibly daunting and at times I deeply questioned if the act was producing anything of value: Was I truly forwarding a profound intertextual experience with this experimental thesis or was I simply wasting pages and hours with self-indulgence? The thriving, passionate work came once I set aside the projections of what the project wasn't and would never be to the side and I instead recognized the honoring that was happening by inserting myself into an active relationship within the texts and my understandings of them.

By navigating the standardization and personal ownership of my critical writing in this new and creative exploratory way, I found an opportunity to confidently order and ground a validated personal rationale to my voice. I recognized that this lens may be limited to my own subjective understandings, but this placement allowed me an access point to find confidence and credibility within scholarship I was and will always be novicely discovering. (And shouldn't we always feel as if we are novice discovers of scholarship as we work through our ideas and research?) I, therefore, needed to see myself engaged with the work of essaying in the first place by entering into the work intimately as a means to control the direction and analysis I hoped to present to my audience, and ultimately for myself. This reclamation became a rhetorical device for me to centralize my voice and writing style as a conversational pathway through the argument and pivots I worked through in a bold and empowering way.

While claiming space for myself has been a consistent thematic yearning throughout my life, personally, creatively, and academically, it was not until I found myself leading a classroom of eager-eyed first-year scholars that I embraced and validated this fundamental passion and pathway as my own pedagogical philosophy. Because I struggled with my own writing voice anxieties during my academic career, the work and curriculum planning of both my Teaching Associate and Graduate Assistant positions throughout my graduate program allowed me to recognize an authority that academic voices gain by writing on and connecting to their own lived

[2] Echoes of my culminating MA thesis project and other pedagogical scholarship I worked on throughout my graduate career exist here in this article. Sections from the critical rationale within the thesis, specifically, work to meditate on the purpose of the personal and creative literary reflection as it develops the confident voices of other scholars seeking their placement on the page as well.

experiences. The connective, collective empowerment that develops a generation of community engaged scholars grows from a need for offering value to that individual expressive voice.

Crafting writing assignments that center and validate our students' experiences allows their arguments a greater synergy between community engagement and personal narrative on a truly humanistic level. The primary and secondary works they draw from become alive in readers when they see their own goals, desires, and traumas reflected on the page, or as an embracing discovery of contrasting new ones.

As with my own experience of writing anxiety, students often struggle with a sort of performative projecting of their writing voice. This attempt to standardize their voice to proper academic assumptions privileges Standard Academic English (SAE) expectations over their own authority on the page. It is incredibly exciting to imagine how much more we can engage writing studies when we offer students the capacity to rebuild and heal their experiences in the classroom and beyond by allowing for a validation of the personal and experiential in their reading and writing. Ironically, by legitimizing our students' individual experiences as evidence in their scholarship (through anecdotes, use of first person, pathos driven arguments, etc.), we open up their research to a more inclusive, community-engaged chorus of voices. Standardized skills will develop as students matriculate through their academic studies, but how much more empowered they will be if they have a solid foundation of self-actualization and shared advocacy to build those skills upon!

So many of the critical and scholarly writing issues I notice in my first-year writing students, as well as my own academic experience, come from the tensions that Harold Bloom refers to as the "Anxiety of Influence" and the need to feel that your work establishes a completely unique and fully separate, insightful wisdom. When we limit the center of our arguments, whether our academic endeavors or our creative ones, to exist in this false sense of uniqueness as a means to enter into the conversation, we risk reducing the impact of our voices by not recognizing the links and lineage those voices first evolved from. Bloom's point that "each poet's fear that no proper work remains for him to perform" (148) highlights an innate angst within all levels of expression, scholarly and otherwise.

While Bloom's text works through the specific concerns of poets, this anxiety overlaps into academic writing as well. Composition student learning objectives remind students that the impact of their supported analysis reflects a new, deeper facet of understanding. Student voices are assessed on it, critiqued to find a perfect balance of summary, explication, and insight, demanded to take a text and re-present it on the page in a unique and singularly researched, reflective way. Once we recognize and embrace the personal as an accepted creative inability to purely recreate what came before us, it instead becomes an emboldened expression of synthesis. Unique insight and imagination will ground itself into any academic conversation with confidence. Students' arguments instead position themselves in the act of essaying, asking deep, philosophical questions of reader and author as the work works itself out through the pages of academic discovery.

As an English professor (or potential one as I currently navigate the limbo of the academic job market!), the focus of my own scholarship and the teaching of composition becomes an offering into a creative insertion of self within a thriving literary lineage. Critical scholars first revisit the voices that walked along and ground down the literary pathways ahead of them. A pathway that insists on a guided entrance onto the page alongside and in conversation with the voices that move unique and creative insight to light. Embracing our insertions allows us to navigate shifting winds with Homer, claim the artistry of voice with Marie de France, sing praises to the power of creativity with Mary Shelley, whisper the most base needs of our hearts onto the

page alongside Ocean Vuong, skip stones with Toni Morrison, Virginia Woolf, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Walt Whitman, to name a few. Narrativizing critical commentary by placing our own finite selves as an entrance into presenting scholarship offers an infinitely beneficial relationship between author, audience, teacher, and student, an intimate fellowship of shared critical wisdom that stirs original intuitive perspective into a visceral reordering of critical, scholarly engagement.

To enter into the work in this personal and communal way may seem a subversion of the objectivity of scholarly insight, but subjectivity often brings powerfully emblazoned scholarship and movements to life! We see black, feminist, queer, borderlands, postcolonialist, and critical disability subjectivity posit a richness of experience through the narrow clarity of each lens. The intersectionality of identity acts as a prism to open and enlighten the voices of the past, present, and future. Subjectivity embraced to shift understandings and misunderstandings of constructs deeply embeds itself within the global culture at large. Adrienne Rich's commentary on her own subjectivity in writing on motherhood amplifies the responsibility in not separating the self from scholarship:

> *Of Women Born* [*:Motherhood as Experience & Institution*] was both praised and attacked for what was sometimes seen as its odd-fangled approach: personal testimony mingled with research, and theory which derived from both. But this approach never seemed odd to me in the writing. What still seems odd is the absentee author, the writer who lays down speculations, theories, facts, and fantasies without any personal grounding. (xxviii)

When we offer students the space to insert and discuss the faces from their readings alongside their own positionalities, engaged conversations ignite, a reclamation that we all, teacher and student, refuse to no longer exist in reality as disassociated absentees within our scholarship.

My own "personal grounding," as Rich suggests, my critically engaged creative personal scholarship, thrives when I nurture and comfort its very subjectivity within my research and teaching. Intentional subjectivity in this way, is the opposite of reducing a work through the limits of any particular lens. Claiming the empowered subjectivity of self, within our scholarship and the productive growth of our students, insists on an interdisciplinary forwarding of nurturing and community building, a vibrantly intimate unfolding of the interconnected layers of voices as a deeply profound collaboration. By situating a central first-person lens into our academic voice, we allow ourselves and our students the power to see themselves existing on the page, a respected lineage innately woven into all our scholarly, writerly hearts.

Writing from Mesas and Glaciers

Kathryn Perry

I was a shy child, and I loved to write. I felt—and still feel, honestly—more comfortable expressing myself on the page than to people's faces. Some of my first creative pieces were descriptions of the creek near my house where my brother and I would catch salamanders and crawdads. I grew up hiking in the sloping mountains of north Georgia, and many of my early attempts at poetry involved nature. But even from childhood, I put enormous pressure on myself to be perfect in whatever I was doing. This made it difficult to take risks because I feared failure. I was afraid to share my writing in case someone judged it harshly. I was also slow to practice the independence that moves kids from childhood to adulthood. I postponed getting my driver's

license and didn't go to sleepaway camp until I was a teenager. I vividly remember fearing college and the inevitable separation from my family; it felt like a tremendous risk that I couldn't imagine being ready to face.

But I did face it. The summer I turned 17, my love for writing and my understanding of its power to connect people were cemented. I spent two weeks at a creative writing summer program in Ghost Ranch, New Mexico with a small group of other teenage writers. We wrote each morning, workshopped each afternoon, hiked through Georgia O'Keefe's landscapes and watched sunsets atop mesas. It was the first time I felt so deeply connected to others through the act of writing together, and it planted the seed of the power of collective writing experiences to connect people to each other and to their surrounding landscapes. I include here the poem I wrote to capture the visceral sense of community (it's a bit heavy-handed and loaded with adjectives, but I was a teenager after all!).

My Goodbye

We stood in a circle and, one by one,
reached into our chests, pushing aside
flesh and white ribs and gelatinous
tissue to grasp the glistening
pink muscles that were our hearts.
We let them fall (splat!) onto silver
platters at our feet. Raising them in
a toast, we looked into each other's
bloodshot eyes and heard a whispered
cry, "This is my heart. Take it!"

Our hands trembled with anticipation as we
explored those pulsing nooks and crannies.
Near the end of the journey our hearts
returned to us dusty and covered with fingerprints.
We licked them clean and savored the burn
of the land on our tongues.

Now the circle was tighter as we stood,
shoulder to shoulder, and passed around the
heavy plates. This time, each one of us took
a small bite of every throbbing heart. That
rich red taste filled our mouths and
flowed down our dry throats, satisfying
terrified desires. After licking our lips of
coppery blood and salty tears, we shoved
the gleaming ragged hearts back into our
broken chests.

The scar that remains is slick and shiny.
I press my hands against it and feel the

new beat like a reverberating patchwork
drum. I listen to each voice that has been
stitched there, and the soft murmuring rocks me
to sleep. I fly home relishing the exquisite
pain of eighteen patches on my heart.

I share this poem and my Ghost Ranch memories because stories matter, particularly the evolving stories of our own vulnerabilities. For many of us, stories are the bread and butter of our academic careers. And for all of us, stories are what bind us in our collective human experience. Yuval Harari, as he tells of the origins of modern homo sapiens, writes of the power of human language to refer to things that don't exist, and to do so on such a grand scale that it alters the course of history: "There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws, and no justice outside the common imagination of human beings" (28). Stories are powerful, and origin stories particularly so. Jose Vargas, in his work to get us to rethink citizenship, asks these three questions: "Where did you come from? How did you get here? Who paid?" In tracing our ancestors' homelands and journeys and identifying the threads of resources woven into the portrait of our current lives, we gain a clearer understanding of why and how we got where we are, and that knowledge shapes what we do with the rest of our lives.

To answer Vargas's questions, I want to recognize my privilege as a white, cisgender, straight, (temporarily) able-bodied, upper-class woman. My ancestry is one of my stories; I come from British and German middle-class ancestors, many of them engineers. Four-year degrees have been achieved and expected in my family for at least four generations, as have family financial resources which have increased over time. I am a writing professor because of my grandfather on my mother's side, who used his engineering skills and intellect along with some family funds to build a company that earned a small fortune and contributed to many of the opportunities I've had in my life. I am also a writing professor because of my grandfather on my father's side, who was a journalist and self-published his own books. I am a writing professor because of my father, from whom I get my pleasure in manipulating language and my perfectionism. He also practiced law, a career he often did not enjoy, and earned a generous living that paid for many of the opportunities I've had in my life. I am a writing professor because of my mother, who knew that loving and supporting me unconditionally was the best way to get me to take risks. She also took me hiking at every opportunity.

This story of privilege is one of the stories of my life. The opportunities afforded by privilege, along with the empathy and desire to do good in the world that my parents instilled in me, and the patience with which my mother nudged me towards independence, have shaped who I am. My life traces and tells many stories in addition to the story of privilege: I climb mountains, I worry too much, and I have an insatiable sweet tooth. These snippets are easy to share; my greatest fear in sharing the story of my privilege is that I might alienate my students by highlighting our socioeconomic differences. The power differential between professor and student can be exacerbated by additional differences in identity. But how can I ask my students to be vulnerable if I don't do the same work, no matter how scary? In sharing the stories of my life and my pedagogy, I want to create the opportunity for connections built on transparent, collective vulnerability. And, if we only tell ourselves one story about who we are, we rob ourselves of our own dignity to grow. Chimamanda Adichie says that "when we reject the single story, when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise." I think we

can regain this kind of paradise for our own lives and possible futures, and through this we can also regain a kind of paradise in our English classrooms.

We might start by following the pedagogical advice of Christina Cedillo and Phil Bratta who write of a particular kind of storytelling instructors can enact, thoughtfully and deliberately, to help marginalized students claim their space in academic institutions. They articulate the possibility for instructors to share "positionality stories," or stories of "lived experience" that reveal how instructors exist within complex networks of identity, institution, power, and history such that students can "move away from self-impressions of deficit that arise from assumptions that instructors are 'naturally' assimilated into educational cultures" (216). In other words, the stories we tell ourselves and our students about where we come from matter. We must not only understand the many stories our students bring with them to our classrooms, we must understand and share our own stories. Origin stories matter, and so does the ongoing evolution of these stories. If we don't understand where we come from, it is difficult to understand where we are, but if we only see our life as one single story, then it is difficult to change where we are going.

While my life story is, in part, a story of privilege, particularly how this privilege helped me get where I am now, this is not the only story. I want to tell the stories of how I came to love shared writing experiences and engaged, experiential learning. In what follows, I trace my growth in vulnerability as a writer and risk-taker from my family history to my early and more recent encounters with transformative community and nature writing experiences, and then connect this growth to my pedagogy in which I encourage students to write beyond the classroom and collaborate in vulnerable ways.

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The second time I wrote a poem surrounded by intimate strangers-become-friends, I was trekking through the boundless wilderness of Alaska on a thirty-day outdoor leadership course. In my own attempt to push myself, I spent a month living outdoors and practicing wilderness leadership skills in Alaska with the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS). We sea kayaked through Prince William Sound and backpacked through the Talkeetna mountains, learning to make do without technology, to cook with limited ingredients, to navigate rough terrain with only a map and compass, to endure great physical discomfort, to leave no trace of our presence on the land, and to support and lead each other safely.

I tell my students their voices should be the loudest voices on the page. It is, unsurprisingly, difficult to follow my own advice. In Alaska, the most frequent comment I received about my leadership style was that people couldn't hear me. As we paddled through the silt-green glacial sea, surrounded by bald eagles diving from Sitka spruce and salmon leaping across our bows, I shouted. To give directions, to check in with folks, to stop for a snack break, to solicit feedback on our route—my voice just didn't carry. I wasn't loud enough, and it was disheartening. How could I lead if no one could hear me?

But weeks later, one evening in the Talkeetna mountains descending a steep talus slope with heavy packs on our backs, someone fell. Jess. She hit her head on a rock and, though she was fine, we were all shaken. The potential for serious injury out in the Alaskan wilderness became real, and the mood as we continued our descent was somber. Without thinking, I started to sing Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah," one of the few songs I knew by heart. Quietly, more to myself than anything, I sang as we carefully picked our way down towards camp.

Back in civilization and before we went our separate ways, Jess told me how meaningful it was that I sang that day. “It felt like you were singing to me,” she said, “helping me to keep going.”

Alaska was the hardest thing I’ve done thus far in my life. And though the physical risks felt great, the emotional risk was greater. Being vulnerable with each other—whether that meant crying from exhaustion on the shoulder of someone you’d just met, or accepting criticism of your leadership style, or the simple vulnerability of learning new skills together—was the true challenge. It isn’t always about having the loudest voice, or the most memorable story. It’s about collective vulnerability.

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Like the Ghost Ranch poem, the poem I wrote in Alaska celebrated a community of strangers opening up to each other. What I tried to convey in both poems is the significance of shared vulnerability. Now I find myself creating space for students to connect and collaborate with those beyond the classroom, for students to write and share their work, hoping perhaps for students to have their own Ghost Ranch moments, to push themselves outside of their comfort zones and take risks into unknown spaces like I did in Alaska. The story of my privilege pushes me to create opportunities for my students, and the story of my growth in vulnerability helps me to create spaces that are simultaneously safe and risky. Just as my leadership style is not the loudest, my pedagogy seeks to amplify others’ voices.

In its simplest form, this space looks like an invitation to students to incorporate their lived experiences into their analyses of course materials. When I teach students how to support their analysis with evidence, I don’t limit them to textual evidence. For example, in a recent course on Letter Writing, we studied historical letters written between family members living in Mexico and the United States, and we discussed the idea of transnational identity as explored by Romeo Guzman in “The Transnational Life and Letters of the Venegas Family, 1920s to 1950s.” In their analytical responses, I encouraged students to draw on examples from the text as well as from their own experiences. Many students identified with Guzman’s article and wrote about sharing similar transnational identities in their own family histories. This kind of engagement allows students to feel more included in this particular academic community and validates their own “positionality stories.”

I want my students to understand the contexts in which they’re writing, to connect with each other through sharing their work and writing together (in small group writing projects), and to connect with community members outside of the classroom. The higher stakes examples of this work take the form of community engaged projects with Words Uncaged, a prison creative arts program founded by my colleague, Bidhan Roy, that has led to the first in-person prison BA program in California. Most recently, students collaborated with formerly incarcerated men to record the stories of their transitions from prison to society. Many members of Words Uncaged are serving Life Without the Opportunity of Parole (LWOP) sentences, but some have had their sentences commuted and been able to join their peers on Cal State LA’s campus. In response to the absence of resources for men making this difficult transition (sometimes after many years of incarceration), students in my class formed small groups and interviewed their formerly incarcerated partners to document the stories of their transition along with advice for others making a similar journey. This experience pushed students outside of their comfort zones as they connected with their partners (whose positions, having been incarcerated, made some students

uncomfortable), as they wrote together (not an easy feat), and as they decided how to narrate their partners' stories clearly, coherently, respectfully, and authentically. In this experience, students' voices were not the loudest on the page. Students grew from sharing the vulnerability of collaboration and making powerful connections to tell the many stories of these men's lives.

Vulnerability is the most important thing we can create space for in our classrooms—by sharing our stories and by encouraging students to share theirs. By creating the opportunity for collaborations—student to student, and student to community. By creating the opportunity for the resulting collaborative writing to circulate beyond the classroom and inspire others.

I tell my stories to avoid getting stuck in a reductive view of my own life and pedagogy, to avoid that single story; by reflecting on how I got to where I am, I can see more clearly the network of resources, people, events, and desires that have helped shape me as a writing professor. At various times in my life, I've felt afraid to push myself into the unknown and discover what I'm capable of—to discover, in fact, that I'm capable of more than I imagined. At the heart of my teaching, then, is my desire for students to experience their own pushing, their own self-discovery, their own moment of fear-turned-elation.

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AOE713

I don't need my bed
or the fridge full of food
or the noise of the world
screaming
through my screens.
I don't need my closets
or the dozens of outfits
or the jewelry
or the makeup
or the razor
or the mirror.
I don't need my car
or sidewalks
or restaurants full of strangers
copying each other's fears.

I need to walk beneath
a wide open sky.
I need to walk from one known
peak to the next unknown
saddle.
I need to carry weight
on my back, and to share it.
I need to feel my heart
open
to struggle,

to fall in love with space,
more space,
never-ending space.
I need to fall in love with these people -
to feel frustration,
to cry from exhaustion,
and to keep loving,
and to keep walking.
We need each other.
Beneath this wide sky and glowing,
angled peaks,
we only need each other.

Brown Girl Pedagogy Pt. II

Lizette Toribio

He asked if I knew about "The Rule of 'I.'" We were peer editing our final seminar papers in an American Literature class, and it had only been about a minute after I handed him my paper when he made his inquiry. I was confused. Initially, I thought he was referring to eyes, like the kind we use to see, but alas he meant the other homophonic term, "I" as in the first-person narrative. "I" as in "me." "I" as in personal. My realization only came after I excitedly replied with anticipation of learning something new about my research. As he explained to me that academic papers are not to be written with the use of "I," it became clear he was explaining what he must have imagined to be standard knowledge for anyone in an English Graduate program. Silly me! As his lips continued to explain the rule, my thoughts contemplated the idea that someone really thought they were teaching me a formal rule of Standard Academic English. He had only read a few sentences in my paper when he explained the rule to me, so my confusion made me unsettled. I only noticed he stopped speaking when his lips stopped moving. Audibly, all I could hear was the silence of the room and how it paled in comparison to my embarrassment. It felt as if everyone had listened to the whiteboy explain the "The Rule of 'I'" to me, treating me as if I was one of his middle school students.

I started that paper much like I begin this one—With a story. Yes, I know about "The Rule of 'I'," but I made a very conscious choice to break that rule during my first semester of the Graduate program. The paper he was peer editing began with a short, intentional anecdote introducing my research on Anita Brenner and her impact on the Mexican Art movement in the 1920s and 30s. The story was about my visit to the Skirball Cultural Center which featured the exhibit "Another Promised Land: Anita Brenner's Mexico." If he had read the whole paragraph, he might have understood the nuances in opening my paper with an anecdote. Anita Brenner was a *gringa*, a white woman of Jewish descent born in Mexico. She loved Mexico, and Brenner's contributions to the modern artistic world in Mexico are largely recognized by American audiences. As I read through the captions of the different artifacts in the exhibit, I noticed how different the translations were from Spanish to English. My interest was piqued by the different connotations of each language. The language on the English plaques was more docile and passive than the Spanish translations—My understanding of Anita Brenner's liminal identity began there. Without imagining that I could relate to her, I found that her liminal identity helped me understand

my own splintered identity. As a white woman, she never fully fit into her social circles in Mexico. As a Mexican woman, she often felt out of place when she was in America.

Looking back, I think I can pinpoint exactly when my home identity began to shift away from my academic identity. In second grade, the Magnet coordinator asked me to no longer speak Spanish at school at the end of the tour she gave my family on the first day I transferred. She suggested I had to do this to make friends, and as a kid, I did as I was told. Without saying it, she expressed that my home identity was no longer good enough for school. I listened, and slowly started to lose my native tongue at home. It was the price I paid to be in the Magnet program. Without realizing, I began to think that my home identity was not meant to mix with my academic identity. My home identity felt loud, fluid, silly, warm, and poetic. My academic identity was well-spoken, polite, palatable, and logical. Somewhere along my academic journey, I began to separate those two beings and I was okay with that for a long time. I simply accepted that there were separate physical spaces that split my personality. This was normal to me. Outside of school, with friends and family, I could be my home self. Inside of classrooms, I modified my personality to fit in with my fellow classmates. For a long time, my two beings lived comfortably separate, but I reached a point where I began to question the need to keep the two separate. I reached a boiling point when I realized that in classrooms, I had always been made to feel like the version of myself that I was at home was not good enough to be a scholar. This was never said explicitly to me, but it began by asking me to keep my home language, my native tongue, outside of school.

The notion of a splintered identity has followed me since my first semester in the Graduate program at CSULA. Well, that is the first time I was able to identify what I had been feeling for years. I wrote a paper titled "Brown Girl Pedagogy" during that first semester. We had been learning about college composition programs, and rhetoric, and moves, and forms, and Standard Academic English and, while I enjoyed learning how all of that came about, I was more curious about the marginalization that occurred (and continues to occur) as those programs are widely implemented. I found myself questioning why none of our readings were written by people with names who sound like mine. Beyond that, I sat through seminar classes where I began to understand that a common perspective amongst my peers was that the better a student's Standard Academic English was, the more intelligent or scholarly that student must be. I found myself at odds with my peers during several conversations, and I love engaging with other scholars when there is disagreement and mutual respect because those conversations welcome growth and understanding. That was my general experience until, suddenly, it no longer was.

We read Gloria Anzaldua's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" and the joy I felt in reading her work aloud was unlike anything I had experienced in higher education. I had never read academic work that so fluidly codemeshed academic writing, personal narrative, and multilingualism. I understood every word she wrote, and, in my mouth, they felt like jewels[3]. Finally, a scholar who made me feel at home. I was excited to return to class knowing that I could finally engage in a discussion confidently because, yes, I absolutely related to Anzaldua's experience.

Once in class, the discussion revolved around whether everyone understood the text. Some students read without the assistance of a translator, others admitted defeat and simply showed up with questions, and another bunch read, and came to class hoping to understand. Quickly, the question of whether we should be allowed to write an academic paper in dual language became the focus. One student argued no, because English is a tool. I argued yes, because the English he was referring to was Standard Academic English, and unfortunately that tool is not accessible to everyone. I explained a tool like a hammer. Anyone can pick up a hammer and learn to use it. SAE

[3] This is how Frank McCourt felt while reading Shakespeare in *Angela's Ashes*.

is more nuanced and subjective, hence, "The Rule of 'I.'" In my academic career, I have only ever heard about the Rule of "I," but I do not have the slightest idea who made that a rule. I have listened to teachers and professors who absolutely abhor the idea, and others who embrace it. Standard Academic English assumes that there is a perfected form of writing an academic paper, but a perfect paper does not exist because it looks different to every individual. To me, Anzaldua's work was perfect—It was academic and lively. It was emotional and logical. It was not sanitized to fit into the realm of academia, which is what led to my difference of opinion with my classmate. The discussion went back and forth until he once again explained to me that SAE was a tool, but made sure to include a hand slamming firmly, loudly onto the table across from me. Immediately, I felt my gut wrench in the pit of my stomach. Here was a whiteboy trying to convince me that I was wrong, rather than trying to understand what I was saying. I seek to learn when I am in school, not to be right. He sought to prove me wrong, and I allowed him to finish his statement as my humiliation dwindled. When he finished, I told him, "I understand what you are saying…And I don't agree with what you are saying" then redirected my attention to my professor and tried to push the conversation along.

During our class break, after that discussion, two girls in my seminar, who also happened to be white, let me know that my response had been very graceful. They informed me that my composure was always in control and had it been them engaged in that discussion, the outcome might have been much different. Initially, my thoughts were to snark and let them know they should have said something. They witnessed the disrespect and decided to be spectators, choosing only to further remind me that I remained civilized while I was by myself, in the long English department hallway. I appreciated their efforts, but mostly their words made my mind completely unstable. And…if they felt so compelled to approach me during the break, why not engage in the discussion as it happened? Their attempts to be supportive were no longer necessary, but they alerted me that I had not imagined my classmate's aggression.

I cried on my way home that night. I asked my friend who witnessed the exchange if I had become a submissive brown woman in that moment. I asked him if my response seemed to be more emotional than logical. How had I walked into that class with so much confidence and walked out barely able to hold back my tears. My friend kindly reassured me. He asked me not to think too much of it, but it was already too late. My overthinking brain played it over and over in my head. Just when I felt Anzaldua had shown me that my identity did not have to be splintered between my Latinx home and my SAE schooling, my identity as a student, woman, person of color, and a first-generation daughter of Mexican immigrants had all surfaced that night. It was because of this discussion that I decided to incorporate personal narrative in my academic writing whenever possible.

I write about the whiteness of my peers because my feelings in those moments were a sense of otherness. Their whiteness was inoffensive to me until they reminded me that I was not like them. Those exchanges confronted me with my own brownness and my sense of identity. Why did I feel at odds with them and why was I so affected by their responses to my academic understanding? After a few days of grappling with the conversations, I understood it was because they reminded me that to be "good enough" in academia, I had to be something other than myself. I had learned to code switch so well over time, that it became inherent, it was second nature to perform academia, and I had grown tired of keeping up the façade. I needed to find a way to reconcile my home and academic identities and Anzaldua's work inspired me to do just that.

I wrote personal narratives in my papers as a means of resistance, certainly, but for me, personal narrative meant survival. I was lost for a bit in the MA program and questioned whether

I belonged in a space where I felt so out of touch. My hunger for the home version of me was growing and I was isolating myself from my academic circle. I was tired of reading the same type of English in most of my classes. I loved literature, reading, and writing, always have, but sometimes, I wanted to find part of myself written into the texts I read for school. I wanted to see characters like me be off the margins and in the pages. I knew it was possible, because whenever I read, I could see myself in the characters I got to know, but rarely did they sound, or look like me. To keep myself steady in the program, and to keep my home identity alive, I decided that I would purposely defy the rigid rules of SAE to show that papers can be scholarly and emotional. Poetic and logical. Then, I wrote "Brown Girl Pedagogy" and my professor's feedback was that I had subverted academic writing.

I was pleased.

From there on out, I sought community. That paper was vulnerable and a few of my peers took notice. My desolate feelings were not singular, and I found a group of friends who shared similar sentiments. I empathized with classmates who related to the texts through their own personal experiences and shared their questions and understanding. I made it a point to share some of these anxieties during Writing Conversations, a student organization I was part of. With Dr. McManus as my chair, I wrote a thesis project that included stories about my mami y papi when they first dated in Los Angeles. My paper was creative, but it was an analytical article that dissected the history of the Zoot Suit riots paired with Margarita Engle's verse novel, *Jazz Owls.* With that project, I honored my parents by sharing their stories on the pages of my project, no longer leaving them in the margins. I knew that my work to survive in academia came at the cost of the sacrifices they made for me to get there. With their limited wealth and education, they encouraged me to always work con ganas. And I do just that.

When I am in a classroom with students, I share these stories with them and listen as they share their own. We read Shakespeare and Luis Rodriguez and appreciate the language of both poets, but, always, we honor our own stories as we equip ourselves to write for different audiences in academia. We use our experiences to learn about the material we read and write as a means of keeping our stories alive. We discuss rhetoric and its appropriate use for different audiences while understanding that, in my classroom, we will always have room for the poetry and theory because there is power in both. We learn to appreciate the texts that challenge our engagement and understanding, because we find ways to make the content relatable. I learn about and from my students every chance I get. We laugh and disagree during discussions, but we are always respectful and willing to listen—That is what I learned in the classroom on the night when I cried on my way home. Now, I teach my students to advocate for themselves in the face of adversity, and if they feel more comfortable advocating in Spanish, their native tongue, I listen. Then, sometimes, when the going gets tough, I can hear my parents' voices telling me, "Hechele muchas ganas, mija!"

Resistance in Vulnerability

Sara Bardales

I carry two labels: Latina and Reader. For the most part, these markers of my identity felt disconnected from one another until I decided to pursue higher education. They collided suddenly in a graduate seminar while discussing the topic of author intent after reading an article focused on the treatment of Emily Dickinson's work by the handlers of her estate. A point of tension for

me within the reading was the treatment of Dickinson's fascicles (the poet coordinated and bound them herself) and their eventful dismantling and rearrangement. I mentioned my disappointment with this act because it removed any opportunities for us to understand the poet or possible poetic intentions better since she and her work became known posthumously. My point resulted in a classmate "clarifying" that readers needed to be comfortable not knowing the author's intent. As the discussion intensified, our professor transitioned us back to the lecture by jokingly labeling me an "emotional reader." Although I understood their comment had no malicious intent, I felt stung by it nonetheless. I sat quietly for the rest of class, and to the unknown eye, my silence signified the end of my participation. In reality, I was experiencing a moment of complete disempowerment because I no longer felt strong enough to speak.

As the evening continued, I questioned why the title "emotional reader" felt triggering and why I felt a sense of failure. I replayed the incident in my mind, scouring for any indicator that justified my professor to so confidently redefine me in front of the entire class. Was my rationale wrong? Had I used incorrect terminology? When I dismissed these possibilities, I focused on how I presented my argument. I could not deny that my interpretation of the reading created a certain intensity, but I took this to mean that I was doing something right. Weren't we, as scholars, supposed to find moments of connectivity? Was I blurring the line between the scholarly and non-academic?

Here, I noticed my *otherness;* although there were other Latinas in the class, I suddenly felt my brownness take center stage. I replayed the scene once more, but now it was filtered by a distorted light that spotlighted me as having used an aggressive tone and overwhelming body language to describe my point. Thus, I began to associate the "emotional" with being Latina because, unfortunately, one stigma associated with this label is over-emotionality that borders on irrationality. Therefore, Latinas like myself carefully navigate this negative perception to avoid further marginalization and perform academia correctly, where logic and rationality reign supreme.

Until this incident, I believed I successfully separated my *otherness* from my academic work and rarely questioned the consequence of this act. But in my apparent failure to do so, my new classification as an emotional reader made me question everything: academic practices, the significance of labels, affective knowledge, and my presence within higher education. Ultimately, I left class wondering, what value can my emotionality add to an already vulnerable situation of being a brown woman in a primarily white space? Moreover, I also wondered about the role vulnerability played when we factor in race, gender, and emotions within academia. This latter thought weighed heaviest because, despite our efforts to compartmentalize and navigate worlds separate from one another, the factors that make women of color *others* to whiteness are never far from our minds. So, in moments where our labels intersect, vulnerability manifests and compounds.

The collision of my labels during class left me feeling powerless and exposed, for it was vulnerability founded on the absence of agency to define what type of reader/scholar I was, as symbolized by my silence. Therefore, in considering myself and other Latina readers, I ask what role and significance vulnerability plays in higher education, especially in our encounters and relationship to literature and writing? This question shaped and influenced the end of my graduate experience because I was taken aback by how quickly I associated my vulnerability with being Latina. To clarify, I did not feel ashamed of my ethnicity or culture, but I felt the weight of their circumstance to my situation. The reality was, even though the university served over a 75% Latino population, it was still a heavily white male-dominated environment. Therefore, when my white

professor implies that my scholarly capabilities fail to meet standard academic practices by reading emotionally, my *otherness* becomes important because we both exist in a space where his perception and words hold high authority.

As a result, to empower myself, I took my vulnerability as an open invitation to explore affective reading and find connections to other Latina scholars as my thesis project. I needed to critically understand my presence within higher education, the field of English, and the humanities. Most importantly, I needed to validate myself in ways that my professors or the field could not. Unfortunately, initial research revealed a vivid gap in how Latinas read literature and the contributions we add to the value of literary studies. Although this meant that there was room for a project like mine, it was evident that the Latina readership was not of interest to the academic space. The lack of research poignantly indicated that I needed to look at myself and consider my literary encounters if I wanted to highlight the Latina reader.

Being left to theorize from within, I confronted the stigma I was too afraid to face and resolved to find empowerment in affective approaches towards learning and discovery in a non-emotional place like academia. Because, truthfully, I had encountered a work of literature that made it incredibly difficult for me to not only read without an affective lens but find myself within the narrative. It was my reading of Eugene O'Neill's magnum opus *Long Day's Journey into Night.* The play transformed from an academic exercise of reading and critical thinking to an incredibly profound experience. Within O'Neill's dramatic illustration of the Tyrone family's pain and trauma caused by addiction, the play reflected my own, forcing me to consider my sibling's dependence on drugs and the familial strife it caused.

My reflection within O'Neill's work reinforced the value and power vulnerability would provide for the success of my project but also in the validation I so desperately sought. But achieving this was no easy task, and for the majority of the project, I found myself afraid to reveal the depth of my vulnerability. For one, I never imagined inviting strangers, let alone a committee of professors, into the tremendous heartache of my life; I feared their reactions to my recalling of memories and description of intense emotion I felt towards my brother's addiction. And it is precisely this fear that made me feel anxious about the personal narrative genre. Moments, where I compared scenes, characters, or lines to my lived experienced, were plagued by constant doubt because I mistrusted academia and its lack of empathy. I feared that these intimate connections could potentially face dismissal or have their validity questioned, or be deemed unworthy of a degree.

But as I began to divorce myself from traditional academic approaches to literary interpretation, I felt liberated and comfortable co-authoring myself into the play. The intimate connections I heavily doubted led me to an even more profound understanding of what it meant to read Eugene O'Neill. Through him, I recognized how the American Dream, the immigrant experience, traumatic pasts, and familial relationships all existed within the realm of my brother's addiction. Through tears caused by these realizations and O'Neill's words, I came to understand myself better. Thus, a story explicitly about a white family finally felt like it was a story about mine, and I no longer needed to divide myself to access it.

The connections between the play and my story were not always clear, but the dangers of generalizing or tokenizing all Latinas in higher education were. Although we share cultural, linguistic, or familial dynamics, I knew I could not speak for us all. Still, despite the risk, I understood that my project contributed to understanding our presence better within academia. Thus, evoking strength and embodied knowledge from my vulnerability, I highlighted our

readership and raised questions about agency, authority, access, and how different approaches to literary interpretation shape our role in the classroom and as scholars.

Moreover, although research on my topic was scarce or nonexistent, I did encounter various forms of personal narratives that reinforced its significance to Latinas and other women of color. One thesis committee member, Dr. Mais Al-Khateeb, recommended reading a collection of essays titled *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color,* where creative writings illustrate life experiences founded on gender, race, family, racism, patriarchy, and emotions. The collection presents influential embodied works by standout names like Gloria Anzaldua, Audre Lorde, and the Combahee River Collective that emphasize the impact and profoundness of the personal voice. In particular, "Entering the Lives of Others: Theory in the Flesh" by Cherrie Moraga fortified this for me because it illustrates the power of storytelling and its role in attaining self-agency but most significantly, it brings volume to voices residing in the margins. Ultimately, the writings from this anthology further highlighted how limited our academic approaches to studying literature, interpretation, and knowledge are, and it further reinforced the potential dangers we can enact by promoting practices and beliefs that constrain our understanding of what it means to be logical versus irrational, especially when vulnerability becomes a factor in the academic experience.

Indeed, one does not necessarily need higher education to find works like *This Bridge Called My Back.* Still, until works like these become widely known, academia must take inspiration from them and enact a much kinder and more sympathetic pedagogy that promotes inclusivity in the stories and voices that fills its classrooms. In doing so, we understand that labels at the crossroads of academia are open opportunities to redefine what it means to learn and produce knowledge. I was fortunate enough to work with a committee of professors who fundamentally understood this need despite the imbalance of representation. And, even in moments where tensions over the politics of racism, academia, grammar, and the role of emotions surfaced, we managed to come together and work towards a greater good.

Moreover, this was also the case for the community I formed within the graduate program. In my attempts to understand my presence within the department, I found other women of color who desired to do the same. In a united front, we shared our experiences and created a safe space to discuss the high price assimilation cost us to succeed. In all, through our collective vulnerability, we encouraged and uplifted one another to authenticate our educational journey with our lived experience.

And so, being vulnerable can no longer be perceived as a barrier to accessing knowledge but as a means to access it. Vulnerability via personal narrative conducts wisdom through our life experiences and embodied knowledge, and if higher education can recognize the value in these explorations, Latina readers like myself can claim literature in ways we never have before. Therefore, inquiries like this matter because despite our high presence in classrooms, we carry the weight of our cultural and familial history while encountering histories, theories, and stories that seemingly do not portray or pertain to us. Instead, the focus becomes on recognizing what we gain from engaging with texts, especially when it forces us to consider our lives, feelings, and understanding of what it means to exist. Ultimately, we can change what it means to know a work of literature in academic spaces because vulnerability highlights the value and power that a story, poem, or tragedy can produce while eliminating concerns over incorrect ways of interpreting.

Thus, my labels colliding in class transformed from silence into a profound confrontation of anxieties over *otherness* and validation. In allowing myself to believe in the strength my vulnerability possessed, I found the agency to reclaim my title as Reader and use it to co-author

my story into a canonical text. Sharing my family's journey with addiction and emotional turmoil allowed me to understand Eugene O'Neill and his work in ways never imagined within higher education. I found a way to put humanity in the Humanities by accessing literature meaningfully and proving that theorizing from the self is as valid and critical as any other form of literary interpretation. Therefore, to answer the question of what significance vulnerability plays for myself and other Latinas in higher education, I confidently assert that it signifies freedom and empowerment that help combat beliefs and silencing practices founded within academia. As a result, vulnerability is an unbreakable resistance that provides compassion, empathy, and community that lessens the weight of labels and dismantles the belief and need to separate ourselves from what we academically encounter to succeed.

Translating and Reclaiming *Piers Plowman* at CSULA

Michael Calabrese

In 2008, the CSULA College of Arts and Letters had the rare opportunity of holding one of our "Powerful Visions" conference events at the Huntington Library in San Marino, which is 7.1 miles away from our campus in Los Angeles (bordering on East LA). Despite its relative proximity, San Marino is in many ways a completely different world. At the Huntington, the history of wealth, power, and privilege in California is on display in almost immeasurable ways, reflecting a world quite different from that of our working class, first-generation university. I still remember students who had grown up in LA saying that this was their first time there and savoring the free-access pass to the gardens granted that day. I had been on fellowship there, working on the medieval manuscripts of 14th-century poem, *Piers Plowman*. The poem was initially composed in England in the 1360's by a poet about whom we know little and who (we think) was named William Langland.[4] It depicts the dream-induced travels of a character named "Will" (the poet?) who wanders the earth looking for truth and justice in a corrupt, competitive world of human greed and exploitation. His search does not go well. [5]

To explain my work on this arcane poem—and why I would dig like an archeologist into old hand-written copies of this story—I needed to introduce the poem in a relatable way to the non-medievalist, A&L students. I took a chance and entitled my talk "Editing *Piers Plowman* and Teaching the Medieval Past" in the hope that I could make the "medieval past" meaningful. And I came up with the daring conceit that "*Piers Plowman* was an East LA Poem," a poem about working people, questing, laboring, searching for spirit, feeling, and love, wanting the best for themselves, their families, and their communities. I depicted the poem's hero "Piers" (Pete) the Plowman—a noble, scrappy agricultural figure—as a heroic type akin to Cesar Chavez, the California labor leader and crusader for justice, whom we honor each year on the state holiday that bears his name. My mission was to make *Piers* appealing to students who, already somewhat alienated by the environs of the Huntington, might not be too excited about a lecture on the medieval manuscripts of British literature. For when some students hear "British Literature" they

[4] See Calabrese, "*Piers Plowman*: The A Version." For a complete guide and overview of the poem in historical context, see Calabrese, "An Introduction to *Piers Plowman*."

[5] I hope my translation will encourage new readers to explore the excellent recent scholarship on *Piers*, which includes work in Queer, Disability, Gender, and Cultural studies. Readers can seek out the annual *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, a journal dedicated to *Piers* and its world, and can consult the ever-growing bibliography provided by the International *Piers Plowman* Society, which publishes the *Yearbook*: International Piers Plowman Society.

might think of something alien, dominant, and potentially part of a colonial, imperialist history in which they themselves can trace the marginalization and dehumanization of their own peoples—not as abstractions but as family realities. Good time to slip out and stroll in the gardens. . . .

But when the mind and heart are open, I was soon to learn, all literature can witness truths current and urgent to readers of all communities. Accordingly, my star student at the time, Juan Obed Silva, loved the comparisons to Cesar Chavez, and told me years later how formative it was in his decision to pursue medieval literature with me in his work for the MA. He savored the idea of seeing *Piers*—and a host of other related works—as directly appealing to him, his community, his people, and their hopes. In 2022, as I write, we are all celebrating now *Professor* Silva's Memoir, *The Death of My Father the Pope*, the story of his alcoholic father, the trauma of his own upbringing, and the inferno of gang violence he endured. Animating his gritty, raw memoir are lively, meditative excurses into literature from the life-changing curriculum he studied at CSULA and now teaches at ELAC. The spirit of *Piers Plowman* and its longing for salvation amidst chaos, addiction, and woe, emerging that day in 2008 from the moldy manuscripts at the Huntington, found expression in this pivotal masterpiece of Latinx experiential literature.

I didn't know back then what Obed already knew at the time—that one day I would have to translate this poem for my students at CSULA, expanding the clever trope on Cesar Chavez into a full-on rendering of the poem for modern readers in diverse communities. I have seen my understanding of the poem and its perpetual relevance for working people evolve dramatically since I first studied it as an undergraduate at Columbia University, with my own great teacher, R.W. Hanning from Brooklyn, who planted the first seeds, however infecund my mind was in 1980. And, as I soon learned, in order to explore better the dangers of vice and indulgence, and to amplify the importance of justice for every level of society, and to embrace the role that books can play in reform and salvation, I had to go deeper.

Relating to my students and teasing out the proletarian themes of the poem was the first dramatic step in teaching, writing, and translating. But where was I personally in this drama? My own life history, family, and ancestry needed to be drawn into the vortex of the poem, and I needed to confront who I was—my lineage, and the work of my parents, who came to represent for me the poem's major themes of rigorous labor and hopeful wisdom. To this end, as I did at the Huntington, I employed another innovative conceit. For in the *Acknowledgements* to my translation, I make the bold assertion that this 650-year-old English poem is about my Italian American parents, Orlando and Beatrice LoRusso Calabrese, both children of poor, illiterate peasants, who fled Southern Italy in the early 20th century. I employed my parents' personal histories, thoughts, and feelings as critical tools for my rendering of the poem and for my audience's engagement with it.

For me the biographical and the personal became at once the interpretive and the critical.[6] I found in my parents, who never finished high school, an untold history of natural wisdom and of

[6] When I was moved, quite unconsciously, to expand my Acknowledgements, which began as mere piety, into a critical tool for contextualizing the poem, I did not realize that I was at once entering into the vast and complex, multidisciplinary field of "autoethnography." I thank my colleague Donna Beth Ellard for pointing me to critical texts that help theorize our urge (and need) as teachers and scholars for, in her words "conceptualizing, articulating, and positioning personal/scholarly and creative/critical in relation to one another." Representative of work in this (vast) diverse field is the volume by Chang in Works Cited. See Ellard's own *Anglo-Saxon(ist) Pasts* as a revolutionary work of medieval scholarship that assimilates and employs the personal and experiential in the service of creative literary-historical criticism. My impulse to engage with my blue-collar ethnic roots and my family's immigration history as central to my critical writing is also related to a movement of identity-based literary studies, such as powerfully manifested in Moya's *Learning from Experience*. My work also relates explicitly to the themes

noble physical labor—the major concerns of the poem *Piers Plowman*. In the A Version of *Piers* such wisdom is manifested in two women, Holy Church and Dame Study—Will's guiding forces of female strength, authority, and compassion but also of discipline and critique—all quite maternal in so many ways.[7] Work is central to *Piers Plowman*, as the sinful, wandering folk find no reliable earthy guidance except in a working man, a medieval echo of my father, whose exemplary model they can barely follow. My lineage, immersed in the history of immigrant struggle, work, and resilience, makes the poem real for me, just as the Cesar Chavez connection brought it home for Obed.

To concretize the role of my parents, I offered in my Acknowledgements short selections from my mother's journals, in which she recounted saying her Rosary near the ocean, helping my dad and my niece Claudia pick zucchini in the tiny garden in the backyard, or visiting the family of swans in Spring Lake, NJ, carefully counting the babies for fear one fall into harm. My mother was connected to the great energy of love in the universe, the force that Dante says moves the stars. *Piers Plowman* taps into this energy in its constant exhortation to love, to connect ourselves to the beauty of Nature, to seek in God's created universe a sense of comfort, order, and joy. As for honoring my father, I also included a prose poem he wrote about his work shoes, which, beaten and knocked, became the workman himself, the carpenter, laboring in rain and snow to feed his family so that one day his professor son could write these very words.[8]

These gestures are both personal and obviously emotional, but the work also serves a student-based pedagogy designed to engage working-class reading communities infused with first-generation students. Through an awareness of their own lineages, my readers can have the same access to the poem as I do—through ancestry. My doctrine here demands a certain vulnerability. Scholarship traditionally demands a "de-classed," disembodied clerical voice. But my ancestors did not sacrifice so that I could be assimilated to that voice and thus be vacated from the immigration history that shaped me. My students, in my experiences so far in teaching the translation, gravitate toward this aspect of my work—the openness about my family—because it allows them to contemplate their own lineages and to make these family histories central to—not excluded from—their schoolwork and their academic ambitions.

So, my students will find questions like this on their exams:

> *Why does Prof. Calabrese discuss his personal lineage and ancestry? What features of his history does he emphasize and why? How does he apply the specifics of his family's immigration story to the poem? In what ways do you, as a modern reader from 21st century Los Angeles, apply an awareness of ancestry in your study of any number of diverse literatures?*

Such questions give life to the past, to the people who came before, those who made sacrifices, who crossed oceans and deserts, or, in many cases, whose land was taken from them. They may

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of access and inclusivity. Representative of such pedagogical activism is the collection of essays in *Bordered Writers*, in particular Hinojosa and de León Cepeda, "Rhetorical Tools."

[7] The protagonist of *Piers Plowman* is named "Will," perhaps revealing the name of the author, William Langland, but he is usually referred to in criticism as the "Dreamer," because the poem, in terms of medieval genre, is a "dream vision," a work that features a character entering various, sometimes surreal, but meaningful, imaginative dreamscapes. The term resonates well with our concern for those of our students who are modern "Dreamers," the undocumented seeking security, understanding, and integration.

[8] See Calabrese, *The A Version,* x-xvi for these reminiscences.

or may not have had any formal education or schooling, and yet they provided hard purchased wisdom and insight to their descendants.

If my translation reimagines literary criticism as rooted in the reader's personal and ancestral histories, it places care where care is most needed, attending to those who, according to the claims of power, were never destined even to attend college, much less to cherish the lofty canonical texts of medieval literature.[9]

So, to understand and study *Piers Plowman*, we need to draw from histories joyous and traumatic, locked not only in personal memory but also in the sometimes murky, lost and distant histories of those who made us. In doing so we preserve our personal and familial pasts, and at the same time we preserve the texts and authors of the Middle Ages, who become not as distant nor as adversarial as we may have feared.

Beyond invoking such personal and ancestral histories lies another dimension of my pedagogy—the gritty, urban, visceral energies that inform the translation. I have deemed *Piers Plowman* "social justice pilgrimage," which demands that the poem be readable, bracing, and engaging for students concerned with these quests in human history.[10]

To highlight the poem's thematic appeal in this regard, my translation implicitly addresses questions that the poem, and we ourselves, are always asking concerning money, power, and equity: "how can we work in confidence that we will be treated justly?" "Who will render us justice if we are not?" "And what of those who refuse to do their fair share of the lifting?" The quest for justice, equity, fair wages, for freedom from exploitation and corruption—and the quest for free access to water, clothing, and food—stand as perpetually relevant to my students at CSULA, a campus full of brilliant working-class minds and bodies that know labor, conflict, and all the anxieties and traumas inherent therein.

These questions excite students because they make our class concerns visible and important. Class is generally the invisible matrix in academia, not detectable at conference round tables, or in lines for wine and cheese. Class is at once money and time. It dictates every aspect of mind, emotion, and energy of the worker, for class identity animates every decision, every gesture. A birth, a wedding, a death are all events that set the struggle of the worker in motion, dominated by the eternal question: "How will we pay for this?" A question that can't be answered easily nor quickly.

Piers Plowman is the people's poem, and I put it, as best I could, into the people's language, a language rich, resonant, and deeply moving, whether set in a bar, classroom, or in church in an exalted reverie about Scripture, Jesus, and the transcendental virtues of love and charity. The poem's original readership was confined to educated clerics, academics, and bureaucrats, but now we have democratized access to medieval literature, and we can make medieval poetry real, tangible, and accessible.

The poem's social history merges with ours in frighteningly bracing ways. *Piers* is about hierarchy, privilege, condescension, imperiousness, elitism, classism, mockery—all the struggles, hopes, and deprivations that inform the battle between rich and poor, between the self-appointed

[9] See the important comments by Shazia Jagot, defending the study of medieval literature for students of "all backgrounds" in their various struggles for equity and justice.

[10] It appears that many recent translators are reimagining canonical classics in tangible, relatable, and urgent ways, engaging directly with the political, racial, violent, and turbulent histories that inform our greatest literature. This movement helps us transcend canonicity (and to dismantle privilege) and to see great works of global literature as perennially relevant to all reading communities. Works that I associate, either implicitly or explicitly, with this organic movement in translation include translations of the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, and *Beowulf* in Works Cited (see Wilson, Bartsch, and Headly).

elite and the honest working people. That's a struggle we know well. Saving, wasting, fearing, and anxiously watching each precarious moment of loss and lack unfold constitutes the reality of working people, then and now, making the poem ever relevant, as long as inequities dominate a worker's consciousness.

The question remains: what exactly was my consciousness of these issues "before," that is, before the great movements of ancestry-based empowerment that we explore in these pages? When I left Jersey and went across the river to Columbia University in the City of New York, I thought ethnicity and family were things to be left behind. As these episodes between '79 and '22 reveal, I realized finally that I did not have to leave that Italian kid behind—waiting in line at the bakery for *cannoli*. We can all still be part a great tradition of academic learning without rupturing our links to the other knowledges practiced by our "people" as they conquer poverty, illiteracy, fear, alienation, and racism. If I knew this once, or forgot it, or subconsciously suppressed it with working-class shame—I'm not sure. But working with my students and colleagues at CSULA (including the authors here assembled)—hearing their stories, being welcomed into their families and ancestral histories—has reignited and refashioned these realities as central to all aspects of my work.

So, *Piers Plowman is*, in fact about my parents. I want everyone—like Obed and all my students through time—to read this poem and to make the same assertion in their own terms, embracing their own diverse parentages. It's a simple and bold statement, but those who understand, who let it fall from their lips, will sense the power it can bring to readers living and unborn, and to all those who promise to remember.

Cultivating Openness through Engaged English Studies

Linda Margarita Greenberg

Friends, this story may surprise you. It may even upset you. It could be that you have heard some of these stories before or have pieced them together. Or it could be that this changes everything you knew about me or that the parts that didn't make sense will finally fall into place. Either way, asking for forgiveness would invalidate the circumstances that brought me to this moment, so I say only that I am glad this story has found its way to you.

This is a story of passing. Like all stories of passing, this is a story of the search for belonging and self-realization under asymmetrical structures of power and privilege. Or to put it more simply: I was ashamed, so I lied. And lies beget their own shame.

I was born Linda Margarita Guardado. A beautiful name, but one I would lose at the age of six when my mother's husband became my adoptive father and gave me his last name. I have a vague recollection of my mother asking me whether I wanted to stay a Guardado or become a Greenberg. I do remember instantly saying I wanted to be a Greenberg, but can no longer recall why—was it the call of whiteness? Was it the pronounceability of the name in an upper-middle class Maryland school where not a single other child was Latina or even non-white? Was it simply a desire to have a direct connection to a father or to blend in as a "normal" family? I think it was the latter, but I'm not quite sure.

I moved around a lot as a child, but eventually my family settled in Santa Monica where I stayed from third grade on through high school. This offered excellent academic preparation, but also a play yard curriculum through which, early on, I learned three things: 1) it was shameful for women to have babies before they were married or to be a child "born out of wedlock," 2)

undocumented people were "wetbacks" and to be pitied or despised, and 3) to the extent that I succeeded academically, my success seemed more linked to my Greenbergness than my Latinidad (or so the comparative lack of other Latina faces in gifted-and-talented education or in my Honors and A.P. classes seemed to indicate).

So I passed. I let people believe that my mother married my adoptive father before I was born and that I was a Greenberg from birth. I explained away the lack of pictures of my father in my baby album as "he was taking the photos." I was silent and confused when a friend told me it was clear I was half-white because I didn't look as Latina as others.

And I passed. I did not share that my mother crossed the border with no documents, but just me in her belly. I masked my fear of the police. I was grateful for the citizenship my Los Angeles birth granted me and that my mother's marriage afforded her.

And I benefited from passing when my last name made it difficult to lump me into prevailing stereotypes about Latina students that might otherwise have shaped my education. I stood out, and it is impossible to say how much of my academic success was due to my own smarts or to being different enough that I sidestepped implicit biases.

But sidestepping biases meant sashaying into denial, and after years and then decades, it became impossible to tell my closest friends—women with whom I've shared junior high lunches and weddings and births and funerals—the story of what has not been told. Having my own two children exacerbated my feelings of thwarted belonging: how do you tell your children they belong inherently and fully when you continue feeling the specter of unbelonging yourself? Apparently, you write an article about Engaged English Studies and hope they read it when they're older.

In a strange way, it makes perfect sense that my personal confusions and confessions are tallied and told in an article about community engagement and curriculum at Cal State LA. It was in a classroom at Cal State LA that I first told *anybody* my family's undocumented immigration narrative. It was my English Department colleagues that I first told I was half-adopted and explained away my last name with seeming ease and joviality. It was with Cal State L.A.'s Dreamer's Resource Center that I had my first conversations about undocumented experiences with people outside of my own family. The lie here was in the seeming ease of the truth: the seeming comfort with which I disclosed my stories occluded a different secret: the shame of having previously covered up undocumented roots and adoption and the ongoing shame of being unable to break out of that story in my fuller life beyond academia.

I am grateful to Cal State LA for bringing me out. It took seeing my fabulous students, many of them Latina, some of them undocumented, for me to embrace new models of belonging. While I can only imagine that some students were, like me, hiding in the shadows, there were also students who moved me with their articulate enunciations of self and adamant claims of belonging on their own terms, who served as a model for how to move in the world openly. In cultivating this radical openness in different arenas of English studies—personal, pedagogical, and curricular—we develop new modes of learning that better represent our students, faculty, and community, and that better leverage the knowledge that exists and is ready to be created within and without academia. This openness is critical lest the curricula of the play yard and the classroom never meet to question each other, probe weaknesses, and inspire new thought.

This is true for all universities. But it especially meaningful for ours. Cal State LA is a public university in Los Angeles serving more than 27,000 students, coming primarily from East Los Angeles and the surrounding areas; it is a minority-majority campus, with almost 70% Latinx students and 91% of students from underrepresented communities. 57% of our students are first-generation college students and an additional 20% have a parent that completed some college

but did not earn a bachelor's degree; 64% of our students are Pell-eligible, qualifying for need-based financial aid. The majority of our students come to us from the working-class and largely Latino/a neighborhoods surrounding our university, and they bring with them lived experiences that deepen their study. They also bring with them a strong desire to succeed, not just for themselves, but also for their communities.

English Departments, alongside academia writ large, carry an ethical obligation to recognize that English matters to our students as whole people, intellectual, emotional, and professional. This means that rather than seeing career preparation as external to the work of the major, departments should embrace professionalization as an internal value—we cannot simply tell students they can do anything with an English degree, but it is incumbent upon us to make transparent the connection between English studies, community, and career. As a liberal arts degree, English has innumerable possible career outcomes, but it's not always clear what those outcomes might be, especially to first generation college students. Developing ethical English curriculum means supporting our students in transitioning from college to career and honoring the high expectations they carry for themselves.

While I miss teaching, I am deeply proud to have served as English department chair during our departmental turn outwards, helping create curricular structures that embed community engagement and professionalization into our English major curriculum. In Fall 2020, our department launched a new Engaged English major requirement, ensuring that every undergraduate English major will graduate with at least one experience applying English disciplinary knowledges, methods, and skills in a community engaged or pre-professional setting. Currently, we are redesigning our English MA program to offer our graduate students a similar professionalizing and community-engaged curricular structure. We want to show our students that the skills, knowledge, and critical capacities they learn as English majors and graduate students—close and thoughtful reading, clear writing, critical thinking, rhetorical awareness, cultural competencies—matter to their communities, enable them to create change, and are relevant to their careers. We want our students to leave Cal State LA empowered to engage their communities and advance in their professional aspirations. And we want our students to know that English matters for them as humans as much as for them as humanist scholars. In so doing, I hope we create classrooms, communities, and worlds where passing, self-occlusion and other forms of assimilation are not just better understood, historicized and contextualized, but also lose their primacy and power.

This new Engaged English curriculum offers applied, socially relevant, community embedded, and pre-professional opportunities to leverage English disciplinary knowledge. It matters because it empowers our students to enact change. It matters because it shows our students the path to their future jobs and careers. It matters because it redirects students from false progress narratives in which they emerge from their communities naked to be clothed by an academy that exists as the sole site of knowledge. Engaged English matters because it cultivates openness to multiple forms and sites of knowledge, for students, yes, but also for those who never had that opportunity or did not follow that path; and it reminds faculty and community professionals that knowledge is not static and fixed to a place, but continuous and mobile and most resonant in chorus rather than alone.

Embracing Engaged English Studies involves an opening of self and an opening of the field, an opening to each other and an opening to other ways of imagining how we learn. Engaged English Studies demands recognition that students' intellectual lives develop alongside their emotional selves and their professional aspirations. In the years to come, I hope to see English

curriculum—and university curriculum—cultivate a praxis of openness to different experiential pedagogies and curriculum as well as an ethos of openness to communities as critical forms and sites of knowledge. In cultivating this radical openness, we create space for fuller selves and more complete knowledges to emerge.

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