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The Beautiful Struggle: Teaching the Productivity of Failure in CNF Courses

Failure, indeed, is almost as strongly an obligation as an inevitability, in such work: and therein sits the deadliest trap of an exhausted conscience.

—James Agee

“What was required was a new story, a new history told through the lens of our struggle.”

—Ta-Nehisi Coates

The seventeen students in my capstone seminar on “Life Stories”—English, Writing, and Secondary Education majors nearing the end of their college days—lugged copies of a particularly massive tome to class, ready to contend with the challenges the text would present. Despite the book’s obvious heft, however, its author divulged doubts about its ability to capture and convey thoroughly its subject matter: “If I could do it, I’d do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement. Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust a majority of you to use it as you would a parlor game. A piece of body torn out by the roots might be more to the point” (Agee 10). The seminar students were perplexed by James Agee’s strange offerings in the introduction to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, his nonfiction book about the lives of tenant farmers in 1930s Alabama: “He wants to give us a plate of shit? I think he already has,” as one student opined. As the group continued discussing Agee’s opening sections, students noticed more moments when the author questions his entire project, setting himself up for struggle by proclaiming the incredibly lofty ambition to capture every detail, every nuance. Agee imagines the manuscript being rejected by publishers and audiences seeking conventional approaches. He then envisions readers charmed

—but to a fault—by the book’s eccentricities: “[it will] achieve the emasculation of acceptance. If it were dangerous enough to be of any remote use to the human race it would be merely ‘frivolous’ or ‘pathological’ and that would be the end of that” (11). My classroom full of aspiring writers worried about Agee’s insistence that “nothing [he] might write could make any difference whatever. It would only be a ‘book’ at best” (11). The conversation became a series of questions: *What does he mean? Why can’t a book, a huge book like this one about an important subject, make a difference? Can’t writing change the world?* In short, what these students found most disquieting about *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was the narrator’s notion that his project was impossible and doomed to failure.

In the achievement-oriented environment of higher education, situated within the broader context of a culture that encourages even young children to be competitive, well-managed subjects, fear of failure—and resistance to discussing failure—comes as no surprise. Yet, a close look at creative nonfiction writers’ struggles to achieve the goals they set for themselves is productive, in that it can promote student learning about such crucial matters as representation, stylistic experimentation, and process. I define “failure,” here, as the way writers represent their attempts to fulfill difficult, unending, and even unreachable goals in their own work. In the classroom, attempts to address student fears of, and resistance to, such failure do not always go smoothly, but I would like to offer as examples student work and pedagogical approaches focused on three nonfiction texts: Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (co-authored by photographer Walker Evans), Ander Monson’s *Vanishing Point: Not a Memoir*, and Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between the World and Me*.

Much of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* focuses on the writer’s subject position (as compared to those of the people he encounters) and his anxieties about depicting others/Otherness; as James A. Crank notes, “Agee’s real subject was his own persona and its relation to what he was trying to create” (71-72). Crank’s analysis provides a useful starting point for considering student engagement with Agee’s struggles as a

writer, and with other works of nonfiction that similarly foreground “failures” of representation. The book itself stemmed from difficulty conforming to conventions; *Fortune Magazine* sent Agee and Evans to the U.S. south in 1936 to report on sharecroppers, but rejected the resulting article, and the narrative did not appear in print until Houghton Mifflin published the book in 1941. Agee establishes early on that the *Fortune* assignment, even as he extended it into book form, would inevitably fail on journalistic terms: his preface points out that he “found no one family through which the whole of tenantry in that country could be justly represented,” and he later insists that he nonetheless “must attempt to record [his subjects’] warm weird human lives each in relation to its world: Nor may this be lightly undertaken: not lightly, not easily by any means, nor by any hope ‘successfully’” (no page number; 87). The recording, however, is only one aspect of Agee’s trouble, as he defines it—he despairs that no matter how much detail he includes and no matter how elegantly or cleverly he presents said material, readers will not understand or respond: “none can care, beyond that room, and none can be cared for, by any beyond that room” (49).

The 2014 capstone seminar students, particularly those working toward a degree in journalism, were dismayed by Agee’s descriptions of his difficulties depicting the farm families. Meagan, an aspiring magazine journalist, wrote the following in a response paper about the book: “We cannot simply observe and interview and spend time with people and then claim to ‘know’ them. And yet the act of writing betrays that: On what grounds can I believe that I understand these people and these ‘issues’ so much that I can connect the two, write 5,000 individual little words, and believe that I have bridged the gap between them, or the gap of misunderstanding?” The concern aired here is twofold: writers cannot “know” the subjects of their research, and the writing cannot hope to convey adequately anything a writer manages to learn in the process of interviewing and observing. In the end, though, students found reasons to keep trying, as Agee did in stating that he “must attempt to record,” eschew misguided optimism, and *embrace* a certain amount of failure. In the same response paper, Meagan arrived at the conclusion that “what [writing] can achieve... [is] on the surface of what those little, limiting, individual words can do. They can

describe houses and clothes and jobs. They can show readers that, perhaps, our subjects are, in some little ways, just like them.” Taylor, a double-major in journalism and English, found that, “What initially annoyed me about this book now lends it sincerity and endearing vulnerability; Agee’s admittance of his own failures and inability to capture the people about whom he writes is encouraging to me.” As our time discussing the book came to an end, the class talked about it in a new, more patient manner, emphasizing the ways in which Agee’s meta-commentary on the writing process itself added complexity to the scenes he describes, and appreciating the book’s inclusion of details that do not fit neatly into its broader messages about open-mindedness and empathy. For instance, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* offers a complex and not-entirely-appealing portrayal of the farm families, describing them as manifesting “a casualness, apathy, self-interest, unconscious, offhand, and deliberated cruelty, in relation toward extra-human life and toward negroes, terrible enough to freeze your blood or break your heart or propel you toward murder” (190).

In examining Agee’s portraits of the tenant farmers, however, some students noted that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* “fails” again, because the book smuggles in the kind of simplistic sentimentality Agee criticizes elsewhere. While he scolds readers for making assumptions about people living in poverty, he also interprets and expresses the tenant farmers’ thoughts and feelings without clarifying that these are his perspectives, not theirs: “There was in their eyes so quiet and ultimate a quality of hatred, and contempt, and anger, toward every creature in existence beyond themselves, and toward the damages they sustained, as shone scarcely short of a state of beatitude” (30). I appreciate students’ astute observations when they point out such blind spots, but would not wish anyone to dismiss this entire narrative on the grounds that the author is hypocritical, or on the grounds that contradictions must, inevitably, undermine the whole project. Critic Jesse Graves suggests that Agee’s contradictory thinking was the only reasonable way for him to process what he saw in the American South: “he himself is unable to make a unified response to his age and the problems it presents any sensitive, impassioned young mind” (103). Graves’s

comment also applies to Agee's attempts at depicting himself as narrative persona, attempts which also suggest an understandable lack of unified, consistent thinking in the face of a violent, threatening society steeped in race and class animosities. The slippages in (and struggles with) representation and voice/narrative persona, then, can express something fundamental about the situations described in the narrative.

Asking students to consider the possibility of Agee's "failures" as productive, in the way Graves implies in the passage quoted above, led to several seminar meetings' worth of long, awkward silences during class discussion. How, then, can instructors encourage students to think and talk about writing struggles, and about what these struggles produce? One way is to continue sharing and discussing narratives, like Agee's, that fit into a broader trend of "performative writing," which, as Katrina M. Powell describes it based on J.T. Austin's notion of performativity, includes memoirists "[imitating] the discursive conventions of that genre while simultaneously recognizing its inability to represent their lives fully. By not simply following accepted or normative codes for autobiography, performative autobiography critiques hegemonic discourse through its self-conscious treatment of the genre" (137). While its questioning tone primarily focuses on the textual depiction of the farm families rather than the narrator's self-presentation, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is an early example of this type of self-conscious nonfiction prose—a type that has become more common in recent years.

Ander Monson's *Vanishing Point: Not a Memoir*, a book that appears on the reading list in several of my creative nonfiction courses, epitomizes such performative writing, and Monson's experiments with style and offbeat humor often attract the students who find Agee's work pretentious. As Powell notes, "[r]eading life writing as performance asks students to look beyond the textual representation to ask further questions about truth, narrative, and representation in general" (138). Monson foregrounds the act of representation, and his experiments with language and format pose those questions while encouraging students to try his techniques, inspiring them to find other relevant ways to play with style and

organization in their own work. One essay from *Vanishing Point*, “Voir Dire,” particularly emphasizes the importance of experimentation in working to represent, in a piece of life writing, the narrative persona and its interlocutors.

“Voir Dire” is an account of the narrator’s jury duty experiences; he is selected as foreman for the jury deliberating the case of Michael Antwone Jordan, who has been accused of “uttering and publishing”—a variant of bank check forgery. The jury finds Jordan guilty, in part because he does not take the stand to tell his version of the story. Jordan’s refusal to represent himself operates alongside other aspects of courtroom protocol that depend on narrative to function: the regulations that jury members assume they know in advance thanks to popular television shows, the confessionals that plaintiffs and defendants produce, and the perspectives of eyewitnesses told as stories on the stand. Monson’s narrative persona links these constructed legal narratives with his experiences as an essayist. To connect the essay’s two main threads, he writes, “I have reconstructed this story out of other stories, fitting them together so they feel (hopefully) satisfying. And the self-consciousness, the self-analysis, that I return to as a kind of habit is perhaps an antidote to the pressure I feel of writing nonfiction, of claiming that humans can ever actually present the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but, on paper, permanently” (22-23).

Meta-commentary of the sort quoted above is one of the many ways Monson addresses the constructed nature of narrative and narrator: “The unreliability, the misrememberings, the act of telling in starts and stops, the fuckups, the pockmarked surface of the I: that’s where all the good stuff is...that which engages the reader” (17). Instead of attempting to create a seamless narrative, he leaves the hems unstitched—he offers a memory and then backtracks, undermining his own credibility; he uses footnotes to talk back to his own text. The paragraphs of “Voir Dire” and *Vanishing Point* as a whole are studded with asterisks leading readers to a website where they can encounter additional stories—some seemingly tangential, others perhaps more emotionally resonant than the anecdotes appearing in the book itself. Play with typography and margin size also abounds. All of these flourishes work together to foreground the

narrative as constructed, and while that construction may in fact be painstaking, it also occasionally resembles an IKEA dresser built by drunken frat boys.

As was the case with the capstone seminar students' reactions to Agee's work, students in my 2015 "Reading and Writing Autobiography and Memoir" course expressed mixed feelings about "Voir Dire" and *Vanishing Point*, ranging from resistance and frustration to curiosity and enjoyment. In one short essay, a senior named Choy characterized Monson's writing as "secession" from memoir because it "lacks a continuous storyline/timeline, is littered with interspersed commentary, and feels almost impenetrable—we are only given the outer layers of his story, never reaching the core." The word "lack" is important here, denoting the idea that Monson is missing something crucial, while the sense that readers cannot reach "the core" suggests that Monson's audience may also feel a lack—of clarity, of connection with the narrative. Choy later noted that *Vanishing Point* "left [her] feeling removed, an outsider," a point echoed by several classmates; one named Emily wrote, "Monson's experimentation with margins, extensive footnotes, and structure makes the reader work for nuggets of truth, work the reader may not be willing to undertake," while another, Brian, stated, "I was expecting a story. I was expecting to get more of a struggle or confession. To be denied that traditional element was disconcerting."

Emily's idea about the reader's "work," though, points toward the notion of narrative as ongoing struggle—a notion that I hope students will understand through the reading and writing assignments in my creative nonfiction courses. Brian's response essay on *Vanishing Point* admits that the book's stylistic quirks are irritating, and also imagines some reasons why Monson might structure the book as he does: "Through the mere act of giving his audience something that is not traditional, and then talking about it, explaining why, and justifying his actions, he is still being autobiographical." Monson's struggle with the material—the "pockmarked surface" of his narrative "I"—may function more as an intensification or enhancement of nonfiction writing, rather than an error, problem, or lack. Another student in the same course, Avery, describes Monson's flailing "I" as follows: "It's playful, it's bold, and it begs the reader to do more, think

more, engage more with a text that they are already reading...As representative of Monson's self, the text is simultaneously pinning it down with a thumbtack and waving at it like a lost balloon, spiraling away. Which, as he says ceaselessly throughout the text, is the ultimate failing of representation in memoir." Avery's response essay gets to a point I hope that students will understand by semester's end: because selves are constructed and slippery, memoirs can be, too. The "ultimate failing of representation"—to borrow Avery's phrase—is productive in that authors' struggles and experimental attempts themselves underscore those authors' reflective and thoughtful approaches to their impossible tasks; conversely, a smooth, uncomplicated narrative may seem like a success, but may actually be a simplistic, uninterrogated narrative. As Agee notes in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, failure is not only "inevitability," but also "obligation" (210).

Monson's experiments—and students' confrontations with these, like Avery's, Choy's, Emily's, and Brian's responses above—also address the broader question of genre. As scholars of nonfiction and the pedagogy of life writing in particular have noted, some sense of "failure" may be inevitable when asking students to consider slippery textual categories that have been defined in multiple, complicated ways. Thomas R. Smith, considering ways to teach autobiography "as—and not as—history and genre," aspires to "help students understand that the 'problem' is not the [assigned] texts' violations of the rules of genre but the inadequacy of genre itself when applied to autobiographical writing" (35). The failure in question, in Smith's view, is precisely *not* individual examples of life writing that undercut or challenge generic conventions, but—as seen in the examples discussed above—authors themselves expressing feelings of inadequacy based on their inability to measure up to traditions and norms. This concern matters in nonfiction because conventions embody and perpetuate ideologies about what constitutes truth or counts as fact.

Here, in light of the question about what constitutes truth, I would like to consider Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*, an epistolary memoir which foregrounds the reasons why a writer's struggles with the process of reaching difficult, unending, and unreachable goals should be included—even emphasized—in creative nonfiction writing. *Between the World and Me*, written as a letter to the author's son, takes as one main theme the multiple, simultaneous effects of language; words construct and perpetuate political and social injustices, but can also be deployed to respond to those injustices. This idea shapes Coates's autobiographical account of his education in writing, and his insistence on the links between learning to write and learning to think critically. He learns to deconstruct the relationships between words and their tangible effects, and uses words to express his findings even as he asserts that language can be used to obfuscate harsh realities and, worse yet, to terrorize black Americans categorized “as the essential below of [their] country” (106).

Between the World and Me quickly establishes the themes outlined above by deconstructing Abraham Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address; Coates writes to his son: “The question is not whether Lincoln truly meant ‘government of the people’ but what our country has, throughout its history, taken the political term ‘people’ to actually mean. In 1863 it did not mean your mother or your grandmother, and it did not mean you and me. Thus America's problem is not its betrayal of ‘government of the people,’ but the means by which ‘the people’ acquired their names” (6). Coates's phrase, “the means by which,” calls attention to the idea that racial identities are socially constructed through language rather than existing independently of the social, as natural phenomena: “Americans believe in the reality of ‘race’ as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world...[but] the process of naming ‘the people’ has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy” (6-7). Coates is careful to note, however, that social constructions are no less powerful than natural phenomena, even if they can more easily be counteracted with alternative constructions: “all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral

experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth... You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body” (9). His book’s title, with its image of a site “between” the world and the individual subject, further serves to emphasize this fraught relationship between language and its tangible effects.

This relationship troubles Coates throughout the narrative—he sees, all too clearly, the racialized discourses that undergird socioeconomic segregation in urban areas (like his hometown of Baltimore), police brutality that ends in dead black bodies on the streets, and unequal access to education in public schools that emphasize discipline over learning. Still, he comes to realize the crucial importance of counter-narratives, and his own role in constructing these. Though his formal education strikes him as yet another brutal, disappointing instance of language acting in the service of institutionalized racism — “[s]chools did not reveal truths, they concealed them”—he does fondly recall his mother’s efforts to help him develop his writing: “not simply organizing a set of sentences into a series of paragraphs, but organizing them as a means of investigation... these were the earliest acts of interrogation, of drawing myself into consciousness” (26, 29). During and after his years at Howard University, he learns about journalism—a genre he describes as useful for processing thoughts through carefully chosen words, for “creating a new language” of appreciation for black culture and for “unveiling the laws that bound [his] body” (44, 62). He also becomes a poet, and though he is self-deprecating about his early work, he recognizes its importance in helping him to process his thoughts “until the slag of justification fell away and I was left with the cold steel truths of life” (51). Still, even as Coates comes to appreciate the progressive potential of writing, he subjects his own attempts at expression through language to close scrutiny, because he realizes their painful limitations—specifically, the pain of knowing that the work of coming into political consciousness via thinking and writing is never done: “as much a series of actions as a state of being, a constant questioning, questioning as ritual, questioning as exploration rather than the

search for certainty” (33). This idea of process and product as states of being is a useful framing device for discussing nonfiction writing with students, especially as many students are far more accustomed to thinking of writing as one of many required tasks to check off a list when “successfully” completed.

In a 2013 conversation with *The Atlantic*, Coates described his experiences as a nonfiction writer and journalist as follows: “I always consider the entire process about failure, and I think that’s the reason why more people don’t write” (Green 2013). His comment may seem disingenuous, coming as it does from a MacArthur Fellow whose *Between the World and Me* is a bestseller garnering favorable reviews worldwide. Coates gestures, however, toward a question that goes beyond the critical and commercial acceptance that generally denotes success—his word, “process,” highlights what failure might actually mean in the context of writing. There are, after all, many memoirs about personal “failures.” Rebecca Hoffman’s list of “Misfit Memoirs,” republished online by the New York Public Library, includes such best-sellers as Gary Shteyngart’s *Little Failure*, Allie Brosh’s *Hyperbole and a Half*, Jenny Lawson’s *Let’s Pretend This Never Happened*, and Tina Fey’s *Bossypants*. Some of these self-deprecating tales of their authors’ quirks, struggles, and foibles may qualify as the kinds of narrative I am considering in this essay, but the texts of “failure” I teach always include a particular element: an account of the author’s own misgivings about his/her process and product. In other words, these narratives foreground their authors’ attempts to address the trickiness of nonfiction writing, for example, the difficulties of representing loved ones and Others, recalling and describing distant memories, or crafting a narrative persona. Explaining her selection process in her introduction to *The Best American Essays 2005*, Susan Orlean asserted that the best candidates for publication in that volume were those that “conveyed the writer’s journey,” and the nonfiction text of “failure” acknowledges that said journey does not have a happy or tidy ending (Orlean 176). Indeed, one of my students, Sara, summarized her response to *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in a way that highlights the connections that authors can make with readers when they acknowledge and process language’s inevitable limitations: “It is Agee’s struggle as a writer that forces the reader to see the humanity of this

book... He is so deeply moved by his experience of living with these families that he cannot even hope to convey the full story without failing them in the process.” Sara’s interpretation corroborates the sense that, despite challenges, texts like Agee’s, Monson’s, and Coates’s that foreground writing “failures,” even when frustrating, can catalyze productive conversations in the creative nonfiction classroom. As Agee himself remarks about art: “If it hurts you, be glad of it” (13).

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