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Exhibiting Speculation in Nonfiction: *Teaching "What He Took"*

In the essay “What He Took,” Kelly Grey Carlisle writes that her mother, on the way to a clinic to get tested for pregnancy, “stopped to look through the dusty window” at a “painted Virgin of Guadalupe, small candles, gasses and vials, metal implements.” The store’s sign was in Spanish, which her mother didn’t know, but still “she recognized the Virgin of Guadalupe” because she lived in Los Angeles. Carlisle probably knows that her mother didn’t speak Spanish through research, but there is no way she could have known that her mother stopped to look in a shop window. She uses speculation, I tell my students, or plausible imagination, to fill in missing details. Kelly Grey Carlisle’s “What He Took” offers an example of imagination at use in nonfiction and shows students that not all creative nonfiction has to be solely about the self, that there are many ways to explore knowing and imagination is part of that.

Carlisle’s mother was killed when she was only a few days old, so she could not have any real memories of her mother. What is impressive in “What He Took” is the life Carlisle creates for her mother—a fully developed story is being recounted before us involving a woman whose existence is elusive to the author. She begins her speculation with a cue word: *imagine*. “Sometimes I imagine my mother in the months before her death,” she writes. She uses *imagine* again in the next sentence when she makes the weather rainy even though a spring rain in Southern California would be rare. Then Carlisle does something beautiful: she imposes her own joys onto her mother, making a reasonable assumption, “But I like the rain, and I like to think she did too, and so I make it rain as she waited at the bus stop.” If we cannot have access to what actually happened, we have the right to speculate the setting, the thoughts,

the weather. Here, the essayist brings in her storytelling ability. Because she does it well, we forget about those cue words and fall into that imagined world.

As the essay continues, the reader is still aware that this is the author's created world: "Before she went to sleep that night. . . my mother thought about her child. She imagined the dark world inside her, the little girl—she had always known it would be a girl—floating in a shaded pool, the cord keeping her from floating away into the darkness." Not only is Carlisle speculating what happened, but she imagines her mother imagining. This writerly move is definitely worth examining closer.

I use "What He Took" to teach students about speculation in creative nonfiction and how to fill in the rest of the story—what can't be known—without dismissing ethics and/or losing your audience's trust. I came to the assignment in a circuitous way. I don't mind personal essays, but I do mind writing that is so close to the self that readers are not allowed in, those private (not personal), peculiar essays from students who were still too close to an event to artfully unpack it into a shareable piece of writing; this type of writing is familiar to anyone teaching beginning essayists. Prior to this course at our university, many students have not had any formal creative nonfiction class. Indeed, these essay may be many of my students' first encounter with the concept of imagination in creative nonfiction (if not the piece of writing on craft). To avoid these uncomfortable essays, I used speculation, as a technique, to show students how to add breadth to their work without compromising truth. Some students have remarked that they did not know speculation was a possibility in creative nonfiction.

The writing prompt itself came from Joy Castro at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln: *retell the scene of your conception*. In the time allotted to us, I never actually got to the love making (phew!), but in that class session I realized something about the genre that I hadn't before: we are allowed to imagine the bits we cannot possibly know as long as we cue our audience in on our speculation. Castro's prompt, combined with with Carlisle's "What He Took" and Lisa Knopp's "Perhapsing?: The Use of Speculation

in Creative Nonfiction,” became the foundation of this lesson with my students. Knopp describes “perhapsing” as what writers do when they “come to a road block or dead end. . . where we don’t have access to the facts we need to tell our story or to sustain our reflection with depth and fullness.” To illustrate this in practice, Knopp uses Maxine Hong Kingston’s “The Woman Warrior” and shows how Kingston introduces what she imagines with the word perhaps, hence Knopp’s term of “perhapsing.” Knopp points out other words besides perhaps that can signify to readers that you’re using your imagination, including the phrase from Kingston, “it could very well have been” or Susan Griffin’s “suppose.” After reading both Carlisle and Knopp, we as a class create a word bank of cue words. I ask students for words that come to mind that may serve as cue words and I jot these words down on the board. We discuss how these transitional words can work in their own writing. In the past, students have suggested the terms ‘speculate’ (of course), ‘I imagine,’ ‘maybe,’ ‘I would think,’ and ‘I can see.’ This part of the lesson usually takes less than ten minutes.

After discussing these two essays, I invite students to write for fifteen minutes using speculation. This is where I employ Castro’s prompt, but with an adaptation: I ask my class to write the scene of their birth—*what happened the day of? What was the weather like? Who was with your mother? What was going through your mother’s mind? If you’re adopted, were your parents there to witness the birth?* And so on. I invite them to use their electronics (something that I usually ban in my class) to research their birthdate online, but the goal of the exercise is to use their imagination to fill in the detail. Use those cue words, I tell them. Students run away with this—they look up the news for the day they were born, they call home, they look at weather almanacs. I am often delighted with some of the students’ results. For instance, Shaun Downey wrote a short essayistic screenplay about his first birthday. When he goes into speculation almost immediately, after setting the scene with camera directions, Downey writes:

It may have been her second kid, but I still **like to think** my mom thought the world was going to end the day I was born. I’ve seen my mother lose her shit over a fallen remote from the hanging

cliffs of an end table, so I can only imagine how she reacted to a human growing inside her and wanting to get out. My father, who can typically stay calm under the most absurd circumstance my mother puts him through, **was probably** cool as a cucumber. While she screamed and howled bloody murder, **I bet** he just calmly grabbed the bag they had prepared and led her to the car. If he's still the same man he is now, twenty years later, the only thing I can hear him saying is, "Ahleen—" (He can't say Arleen because of his accent, which is most prevalent when saying his wife's name)—"Ahleen, calm down. You're gonna be fine."

The emphases in the above quote are mine to show the words Downey chose to mark that he is considering what may have happened. I share this paragraph to show how Downey has realized the assignment and also to show that in such a prompt, a writer has to use what is known to make educated and realistic speculations of what is not known. Furthermore, Downey exhibits rich and distinct characters in his parents in just one short paragraph. Really, the reader can get a grasp on the mother from the second sentence alone.

Megan Freeman more subtly directs the reader to what may have happen. She begins her speculation with the sentence, "He **would have** gone out for a cigarette." Freeman then describes her father's disregard for "no smoking" signs and explains that he would not have had only one cigarette. She describes where he keeps his smokes ("the breast pocket of his tee shirt, a fashion that he still has not changed, from 1994 to 2015") and later, Freeman presents a lovely scene in the lonely hospital parking lot: "He watches the rain melding with his cigarette, finding comfort in that. Rather than the hot, sticky hospital waiting room where he doesn't know what's going on. Of all his previous children, I am the only one not born naturally; he's nervous. I can see it in the way his puffs are quick."

The freedom that speculation, or "perhapsing," gives in creative nonfiction allows students opportunity to use their imagination in ways that they did not think was possible. It gives students who are more comfortable in poetry or fiction a way to use the tools in their preferred genre in creative

nonfiction. It makes for more luxuriant essays when student writers fill in what they can't know with what may have happened. And, vicariously, it reminds students that there is an expectation from your audience that you're telling the truth all the time, except when you tell them that you're imagining the truth.

Later, student Tava Hoag writes in an analysis paper of "What He Took," "it is what [Carlisle] hopes and needs to believe happened in order to find peace with her mystery of a past. It's a genius way to keep readers intrigued throughout the piece. . . . The entire [essay] was so eloquently done [that] I found myself wishing that I could produce something as inspiring." Other students have noted that Carlisle must be brave to revisit a family tragedy in this way. And since the essay begins with the birth of Carlisle's own daughter, we all note the resilience she must have for life and for the hope she has for others.

The use of speculation show students the ability to discover in nonfiction instead of depending on introspective stories. I don't mind students writing about themselves and their lives, but I want to help them see the opportunities they could have in using their imagination even in creative nonfiction. After reading Carlisle and Knopp, my writing students are aware of speculation in creative nonfiction at this point and are more open to imagination at work in nonfiction. When we get to Judith Ortiz Cofer's essay "Volar," some students may not make the correlation between this writing device without guidance, but with quickly understand that speculation is in play after some discussion.

Cofer never tells us that she imagines what her parents are talking about, nor does she tell us that she overhears them, but she uses the auxiliary verb "would." She remembers waiting in bed for her mother to come wake her, allotting her parents the time together to talk. If she's in bed, she might not be able to hear them or the nuisance of the conversation—she definitely wouldn't be able to see them, but she recounts an entire dialog between her parents, introducing it by saying what they "would be discussing." The dialog, when Cofer gets there, is not in quotation marks but in italics: "*How about a*

vacation in Puerto Rico together this year, Querido? We could rent a car, go to the beach.” Cofer ends the conversation by describing what happens next in the kitchen, when her father explains that they cannot afford a trip home to Puerto Rico. Cofer says that she “knew” that her mother “would rise from the table. . . . She would light a cigarette and look out the window.” The transition from memory to speculation is subtle but not deceiving; we understand that it is a fair approximation of a possible conversation between Cofer’s parents. Cofer is not creating fiction here, but as Carlisle has done in “What He Took” (and even as my students Downey and Freeman have done in writing about the day of their birth) she is creating a sensible scenario about what may have been said based on her knowledge about her parents and her own memories. And while doing so, Cofer is sure to make it clear to her readers that this is all speculation.

In their own writing, with speculation, students can move beyond and with research toward a better understanding of their subject. They will recreate in their creative nonfiction pieces not only scenery and situations, combining these with other fiction/nonfictional techniques. Speculating setting is easier; for instance, I’ve never been to Haight and Ashbury and I definitely have not been there during the Summer of Love, but I can recreate a recognizable picture of that San Francisco area through a little research and imagination. That’s not where speculation is needed. Speculation is needed to create characters out of real people, characters that the writer knows well but that the audience does not, just as Carlisle does with her mother in “What He Took” and Cofer does in “Voler”: they make three dimensional characters for readers to see interact within the situation. To create and recreate character, to imagine what could have been going through Maxine Hong Kingston’s aunt’s head before she jumped down the well or the words that Judith Cofer’s mother spoke when she asked her husband again for a trip home to Puerto Rico, that is where character is created. That is what brings the reader into the story. That is where speculation is needed.