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Positionality and Experience in the Creative Nonfiction Classroom

In “The Teacher as Hostess: Celebrating the Ordinary in Creative Nonfiction Workshops,” Mary Elizabeth Pope reflects on her experience in a creative nonfiction workshop where the instructor implied that “good nonfiction explored sad or scandalous topics” such as “sex, cancer, and depression” (105). This is one form of what creative writing pedagogy scholar Janelle Adsit calls “taste-policing” (51), specifically a form where “we expect students to internalize... our disciplinary taste indirectly through immersion” (49). But, as Pope continues to convey her experience in this course, she describes the ways in which such limitations of the instructor’s aesthetic valuations reject, whether intentionally or unintentionally, an inclusive pedagogical praxis. After all, Pope writes, such aesthetic expectations of content for creative nonfiction “can alienate students who have either not had such dramatic life experiences, or who have had them but may not be inclined to share them” (105-106).

Students often express trepidation about finding something to write *about*, confiding concerns that their life, as a basis for crafting creative nonfiction, is not “interesting enough.” It is possible that these students are measuring their lives-as-subject against story creation in fiction. Crafting tension and drama might use similar techniques in fiction and nonfiction, but tension in these two forms of writing doesn’t have to be similar by necessity. The goal is to help students find strategies to arrange, contextualize, and express their unique life experiences in a way that is engaging and provocative for readers.

Pairing Texts: Reading for Positionality

Some of the readings in my course are designed to expand my students' views and understandings of the world. In Glen Retief's *The Jack Bank*, stories of lions on the playground exist side-by-side with stories of discovering sexuality during adolescence. In Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime*, his experiences in Soweto (a city "designed to be bombed" (28)) as a child born of an outlawed union is narrated as matter-of-factly as stories about selling CDs and the awkwardness of going to prom. The memoirs take these larger, more political angles of apartheid in South Africa into account in the narrative, but these more intense experiences are not the sum total of the narratives. Many of my students are, at best, only vaguely aware of apartheid, and so their exposure to it, aside from my brief contextualization, is through the memoirs; the memoirs, in this way, serve as very personal insights into an inarguably significant historical moment, which may be a strategy that students may want to employ themselves in terms of the current moment in American history. Where the South African laws of segregation are obvious to students through the memoirs, in part because Noah includes brief legal explanations between chapters, the United States is a country which often relegates the codification of its racial disparities to the era of Jim Crow laws. These memoirs may give students cause to consider their own political ethos.

The main concept here is positionality. I pair these memoirs because they very clearly demonstrate that two people who are in similar circumstances on the surface (growing up in South African apartheid) can use the narration to convey their own unique point of view and positionality in the world. For instance, Retief, who is white and gay, saw apartheid end after he was an adult, while Noah, who is biracial, saw apartheid end earlier in his childhood. The same topic can be approached from very different angles, making it necessary for students to pay attention to the part that perspective has to play in the creation of creative nonfiction material. Other similar topical pairings are likewise useful, from texts on 9/11 to illness to the death of a loved one. The conversation, then, becomes *where are we, as writers, positioned in relation to this subject matter?*

One approach here is to explicitly point out and discuss the presence of cultural context and the writer's place within systems of society. As Adsit writes, "creativity and invention do not happen in a vacuum. They cannot transcend culture or the realities of hierarchical systems" (90). A conversation about cultural context and society's systems highlights the ways in which Retief and Noah have different experiences under apartheid because of their identities and sociocultural positionality. I push this discussion further by asking students to write reflectively about political moments that they remember and their own perspective on them. As each generation has its "where were you when" moments, this exercise demonstrates to students that what holds the most significance in their writing is not the event itself, but their particular perspective on it, and how their position might be influenced by their identities, preconceived notions, or position within cultural systems. Then we have an opportunity to consider and analyze how identities and cultural context influence our individual experience of particular political moments.

The point in assigning such paired texts is to demonstrate how students can extrapolate craft lessons about the speaker and persona and thematic elements of their writings, bringing a deeper awareness to their essays. Noah explicitly writes about how he lacked understanding of his cultural circumstances as a biracial child in South Africa. When writing about his family, he says "At that point I didn't think of the special treatment as having to do with color. I thought of it as having to do with Trevor. It wasn't 'Trevor doesn't get beaten because Trevor is white.' It was, 'Trevor doesn't get beaten because Trevor is Trevor.' ... It's because I'm me; that's why this is happening. I had no other points of reference" (53). Retief's memoir opens with a teacher explaining how amazing it is that they live in the Kruger National Park, which does not interest Retief or his classmates; a fifth grade Retief, in fact, is thinking not about the "517 species of birds" (1), but about lunch. It is imperative to teach nonfiction writers that a person's cultural context and perspective might very well seem like a nonfactor if not directly analyzed, whether in the context of the essay or outside of it.

Other readings that I select display what students likely consider more ordinary experiences, but still illustrate the necessary positionality of the author. In Scaachi Koul's *One Day We'll All Be Dead and None of This Will Matter*, the essays center around subjects such as attending a family wedding or how Koul's relationship with her parents is evolving as she and they get older. These are topics that are more quotidian and accessible to students, even if the specific lens through which they are told is very different. Students may not be Canadian, raised by Indian immigrants, or writing from the perspective of a millennial woman. However, the topics themselves demonstrate range in what essayists may choose as the focus of their content. Koul writes about more tragic topics in some cases, such as very personal experiences with rape culture, but she is not relegated only to these spaces. While Koul situates herself in a cultural context, it may be a cultural context that feels more similar to students' own experiences. By offering a variety of readings about both the more dramatic/traumatic and the more quotidian, students are exposed to a range of models. If an instructor only chooses texts with "sad or scandalous topics" (Pope 105), then students are less likely to have confidence that their material is worthy of creative nonfiction, which does not foster a generative mode for writing. Students may feel intimidated by the idea of writing about something so overtly political as apartheid, but with work like Koul's, they can find inspiration even in terms of thinking about how, for instance, they might write about their own relationships with their parents. An exercise might ask: What was your relationship like with each of your parents/guardians when you were five? Ten? Fifteen? Now? How have you changed? How have they changed?

With Koul's work, the power of craft often lays in the juxtaposition and the reflective elements as much as (if not more than) the topics themselves. As instructors, we might trace such juxtaposition and reflective elements with our students. In class, students can select a passage that really engaged them in an essay and then, first individually and then as a class, close read in order to point to what events are juxtaposed, what reflective elements come in when, and what effect these choices have for them as a reader. This is an opportunity to analyze the way that one author chooses to fit the puzzle pieces together.

With my students, I frame each craft choice as useful to their own work; they can either learn how to implement something for themselves, or they can learn what techniques fall flat for them personally so that they don't replicate that in their own writing. Expectations of 'dramatic' life elements can be re-envisioned so that students feel confident enough to write about, say, a cousin's wedding or their prom—so long as the craft of the nonfiction is doing important emotional and intellectual work in the meantime. The emphasis here is that, while essays use events to construct a narrative, the centralized focus need not be on the events themselves; in fact, especially when writing about less overtly dramatic events, the centralized focus might very well be on the emotional or the intellectual. It is in the connections that a synthesis is performed and some new observation might come to light in the essay. Understanding the strength of emotional connections to memories can lead the student writer toward explorations on the page that are evocative and compelling whether they "explored sad or scandalous topics" (Pope 105) or not. This helps to build students' confidence in their material as they are interrogating their past, validating life events by undergirding them with emotional or intellectual perspectives.

And further, students can see how they need not only be inspired by the content or by the questions that essays spark in them. They can also continue to dissect the craft techniques and how they might learn from such craft techniques to implement them in their own works. In her discussion of the threshold concept of craft, Adsit frames this as "Thinking in terms of what a craft choice... may *risk* and what it *makes possible*," which "shifts the conversation away from absolutist claims to what is 'right' or 'wrong' in literary craft" (97). Koul, as an example, uses humor and voice to convey her experiences in very particular ways, layering the comedic with awareness of the problematic to offer the reader pieces that both reflect and entertain. This is where they can start to transition from a reader's analysis to a writer's analysis by asking "How did they produce this particular effect?" But, of course, it is possible to help in the initial idea stage of their essays by giving students exercises which make them think about their

memory bank in different ways, maybe even in ways that challenge their original perspectives on their life experiences by recontextualizing how they think about it.

Framing Memories: Reading for Structure

One of the most successful strategies that I have implemented centers around form, structure, and voice. These are some of the more obvious craft elements that students can control, experiment with, and revise in creative nonfiction. We attempt hermit crab essays to think about an experience differently. For instance, framing an important moment in their adolescence as a CVS receipt might require them to stretch their understanding of their own experiences, to frame their emotional and intellectual perspectives on their available “material” in ways that they may not have considered before.

One such essay that worked well for this purpose was CJ Hauser’s “The Crane Wife.” It is a story that some can relate to—a romantic relationship that was toxic, that was never going to work—but it went beyond that, too. They were able to see on the page how Hauser crafted meaning from three potentially disparate threads. The scientific expedition happens soon after the wedding falls apart, so there is a chronological continuity to picking these two particular threads, certainly. However, when discussing the folktale of *The Crane Wife*, Hauser writes “She hopes that he will not see what she really is: a bird who must be cared for, a bird capable of flight, a creature, with creature needs. Every morning, the crane-wife is exhausted, but she is a woman again. To keep becoming a woman is so much self-erasing work” (par. 55). The thread of the folktale highlights theme, allowing it to create meaning between the expedition and the relationship being examined. The point, then, is that essays can be about the quiet moments, and are often about the retrospective and reflective and about how the narrator of the essay has perspective on life events. The wedding being called off is the most dramatic point of the essay, but otherwise Hauser is examining something that might be otherwise viewed as mundane—a failed relationship—and she is pairing it with a trip to study the whooping crane. When summarized that way, it’s not especially dramatic

and might even cause negative assumptions about how “interesting” the essay is; still, this essay was able to stir something in my students as readers.

The braiding of Hauser’s essay enhances how compelling “The Crane Wife” is—the story of the scientific expedition, the story of the failed almost-marriage, and the story of the crane wife. The structure created a point of interest. Creative nonfiction students can’t make up a story to imitate Hauser’s, but her narrative structure and the craft choices to build that structure, form, and voice *can* operate more universally as models for the possibilities of nonfiction and the “practical tools” (Adsit 90) available for the student writer’s potential use. It can help students to have them put different life moments in conversation with each other in new and interesting ways.

As Michele Morano writes in “Creating Meaning Through Structure,” “We read for perspective. And perspective is often very closely tied on the page to structure” (par.6). I’ve often paired Hauser’s essay with an exercise in which students write notes about three different topics from their life, afterwards challenging them to try and find the threads that connect these topics. Or I might have students play with time, starting with a late event in the narrative and incorporating other braid threads that move backwards in time, to give a retrospective lens and to give context to what might otherwise seem to be a straightforward narrative about, for example, a scientific expedition. Morano employs a similar strategy in encouraging her students to experiment with structure, identifying her “goal ... to find a structure that feels organic to the material, that weaves story of experience together with story of thought, that enables you to develop a perspective you hadn’t had before and, in turn, to offer that satisfying glimpse through the surface of a subject to a moment of underlying truth that makes readers think, ‘Ah. That’s it. I see’” (par. 20).

Towards Intentionality

Pope writes that “Creating an environment that treats students’ experiences with respect can also gear comments made by other students and by the instructor toward aiding a student in accomplishing what he or she has set out to do, instead of imposing standards upon the writing that alienate the writer because they are so disconnected from the writer’s life experience or intent” (106). Further, this honoring of the writer’s intention in the classroom rejects the trend that Adsit articulates of “the policing of intention” (51). Workshop allows for its own kind of contextualization: it helps the student writer to articulate and write toward a particular audience who might be interested in their work. In my guide for workshop, I include the writer’s intention as a part of what we, as a workshop community, should be taking into account: “Try to imagine what the writer is trying to do. You don’t want to take over the essay with your feedback and get away from the writer’s intent. Your comments should push it toward the writer’s vision while making the essay stronger.”

This is part of the contention around the question of whether or not students are allowed to talk during their own workshop. In some ways, it benefits student writers to practice listening to critique and not defending their piece. In other ways, being able to engage during workshop to some degree can help the writer feel more in control of their own work. If the writer is able to ask and answer questions (in such a way that they don’t defend or explain the piece), then they have the opportunity to think as writers and receive feedback from the reader’s view, which may aid in reconciling those two approaches in their essay. A positive experience with analyzing the elements of craft makes students more open to refining technique because they do not feel that their content or intention is being dismissed. And this may, in truth, be part of what troubles students about their work not being “interesting” enough. It is in employing as many strategies as possible that the most productive inclusive pedagogical work can take place.

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