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Writing and Teaching the Polemic

Creative nonfiction often wrestles with the polemic. As writers, readers, and teachers of nonfiction, we seek in a work the deeper subject behind the apparent subject, to connect personal narratives to grander socio-political issues and ultimately, to the universal. Yet, in creative nonfiction workshops, discussions of the polemic—that is, the socio-political controversies and debates implicating social justice, equality, and identity (as will be defined in greater detail below)—are frequently ignored or sidestepped. Instead of addressing the author’s project, workshop feedback commonly centers around the amorphous notion of *the craft*—the *how* of the piece, rather than critically engaging with the socio-political issues and themes the writer is expressing through their work. In the current political climate, how do we as nonfiction writing instructors teach and engage with the polemic within a student’s work? Should we at all?

In her book *Radical Writing Center Praxis*, Laura Greenfield makes the case for a fundamental paradigm shift in writing pedagogy within classrooms and writing centers to advance and re-center equality and justice, two ideals which she views as worthwhile to pursue. Greenfield positions her shift in direct response to two popular pedagogical approaches on opposite ends of the spectrum: conservative and liberal. Despite the obvious nomenclature associations, Greenfield frames these approaches not in relation to any political parties, but rather to their respective rules of engagement in polemic discourse. A classroom operating within a *conservative* paradigm is defined by strict adherence to rules and standards imposed by the predominant culture, while one operating within a *liberal* paradigm is marked by an uncompromising respect for all viewpoints. Greenfield posits that while a liberal ideology is generally preferable to its conservative counterpart, both paradigms are inherently flawed: the conservative paradigm

is *under*-inclusive as it rejects any dissenting stances, whereas the liberal paradigm is *over*-inclusive in that it is content neutral and permissive of potentially oppressive and offensive opinions.

While Greenfield's book centers on the writing center, and how the writing center can serve as a place to enable polemic discussions, I posit that Greenfield's praxis is also well-suited to the creative nonfiction workshop context. Whether in the form of memoirs, personal essays, profiles, op-eds, literary criticism, or socio-cultural commentary, the workshop submissions I've seen as both a workshop instructor and a student-writer participant often encompass a heavy polemic element, not uncommonly relating to the author's identity, lived experiences, and affiliated communities. At the same time, some workshop participants demonstrate difficulty navigating these topics in feedback and discussion. As a result, the piece's polemic insights may be underdiscussed or ignored altogether, or worse yet, critiqued in an offensive manner.

If we want to honor the writer's intentions and if those intentions implicate socio-political issues, then it seems to me appropriate that we as writing teachers make space for polemic discourse in writing pedagogy. This article argues that a meaningful way to do so is through thoughtfully applying Greenfield's praxis to the context of the creative nonwriting workshop, to activate such conversations and explore the interplay between craft and the polemic.

At the core of Greenfield's proposal is the conviction that we as teachers must not shy away from discussing and opining on the polemic aspects within our students' works, especially when it is explicit and intentional, that it does a disservice to not only the student-writer but also to our communities at large and to the ideals of justice and equality. Paradoxically, what makes Greenfield's proposed praxis particularly radical is that it represents a moderated position: a middle ground between two currently well-trodden models whereby polemic discourse centering on the principles of inclusivity, equality, and social justice is afforded space.

In *Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel*, Jane Smiley defines the polemic as writing that presents an emotional argument, “marshaling events, characters, and insights in service to a rhetorical point” (181). According to Smiley, the key element of the polemic is “eloquence intensified by feeling and the sense that the writer is pushing the bounds of propriety” (181). As such, the polemic can be defined as writing that uses a combination of logic, rhetoric, narrative, and emotion to make a boundary-pushing argument.

Smiley makes a distinction between a polemic *story* versus a polemic *effect*. In the former, the writer offers a perspective on current socio-political issues through their choice of characters, settings, narratives, etc., but does not necessarily exact an agenda. The writer here is a critical observer. As an example, Smiley offers Ivan Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* (1862), noting how the fathers and the children in the novel represent two worldviews and the growing cultural divide between the two generations in nineteenth-century Russia. But Smiley explains how Turgenev does not press an agenda, but rather “weigh[s] the advantages and disadvantages of several agendas and then leave[s] the question open” (191).

In contrast, works with a polemic effect stake out a position. This does not mean the works need to present any truths per se, but simply that they interrogate the status quo, its beliefs and institutions, and challenge the prevailing worldview. Here, Smiley cites Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) as an example, given its political and ethical commentary on class conflict and mass movement (189-91). Smiley notes the role of emotional appeal as a literary tool: “The requirements of the polemic demand emotional intensity, and emotional intensity can be achieved with highly figurative language” (190). Tone and voice play a large role here. Smiley observes that although both Turgenev and Dickens were writing polemics, Turgenev was an author with a “nonpolemical temperament,” while Dickens often wrote with great emotional intensity.

In a nonfiction context, an interesting case study is Carmen Maria Machado’s *In the Dream House*. Published in 2019, Machado’s book about her encounters with domestic abuse in a same-sex relationship has been described as “memoir-cum-criticism” (Waldman). As Katy Waldman notes in her review in *The*

New Yorker, the book offers both a polemic story (the narrator's toxic and abusive relationship with her former partner) and a polemic effect (the writer's agenda of unmuting what she refers to as the "archival silence" on queer domestic abuse). Yet, we can imagine a mode of discussion within a workshop seminar that tiptoes around the polemic and instead focuses on craft *sine* politics: examining, for example, the innovative ways Machado employs hybridity in modes and styles; how chapter by chapter she subverts established tropes, forms, and genres; how the narrator's point of view dramatically shifts between "I" and "you."

Missing from this permutation of craft discussion are the why's of the matter: *Why* is Machado experimenting with tone, voice, point of view, etc.? *Why* does she choose hybrid forms? *Why* does she shift POV? These questions prompt a larger dialogue about the memoir's core political project: to counteract the historical neglect of queer domestic abuse narratives and to create new language and forms to shine light on a taboo subject largely neglected in literature and history. A workshop discussion that embraces the polemic elements would foreground these issues and the writer's intentions, as opposed to solely engaging with sheer craft talk.

The Conservative Paradigm and its Discontents

Returning to Greenfield's framework, the conservative paradigm often presents itself in the creative nonfiction workshop as one in which power resides in a few and where marginalized views are dismissed. Implicit in most discussions of craft is that there are effective and less effective ways to write, and that a piece of writing can be improved upon if certain rules and standards are followed. In *Craft in the Real World*, Matthew Salesses argues that craft rules are far from culturally neutral: "these rules are more than 'just craft' or 'pure craft,' [such] rules are always cultural" (10). Similarly, Felicia Rose Chavez in *The Antiracist Writing Workshop* notes that a traditional workshop model perpetuates a master canon lacking in diversity and "affirms the authority of white literary 'masters' through a strict study of canonical texts,

imparting an implicit rubric for the ‘right’ way to write” (9). Accordingly, as writer-scholars such as Chavez and Salesses argue, marginalized voices have historically been excluded in this standard-setting process.

Another way a conservative paradigm manifests itself in writing workshops is through what Sarah Blazer refers to as the impulse of writing teachers to “manage” the identities of the student-writer. As Blazer argues, student-writers of marginalized communities might be asked to “compartmentalize” their identities, to either not foreground their identities in their works, or to write about it in a way that is “relatable” to a mainstream audience. However, this attempt at identity management denies a threshold concept within writing studies: that writing is rarely identity neutral. As Kevin Roozen notes: “Writing functions as a means of displaying our identities. Through the writing we do, we claim, challenge, perhaps even contest and resist, our alignment with the beliefs, interests, and values of the communities with which we engage” (Adler-Kassner, et al. 51). Kathleen Blake Yancey has also noted how far-reaching a writers’ identities can inform their writing: “Writers’ identities are, in part, a function of the time when they live: their histories, identities, and processes are situated in a given historical context” (Adler-Kassner, et al. 52). When workshops fail to recognize the identity of the writer, and the “histories, identities, and processes” that inform the piece, the writer’s identities and their viewpoints risk being erased.

Returning to the example of Machado’s *In the Dream House*, I posit that to remain silent about the memoirist’s project of counteracting archival neglect of queer abuse victims is to double down on the very silencing behind the memoirist’s project. In other words, a craft discussion divorced from the book’s polemic project erases the inherent interplay between the writerly moves and the writer’s agenda.

The Liberal Paradigm and its Discontents

If conservatism’s flaw is that it silences and discounts non-mainstream viewpoints and de-centers identity-based factors, then the flaw of a liberal paradigm—a paradigm that is inclusive of all viewpoints—is that it takes it to the other extreme: its relativistic bent can be taken as an endorsement of pure neutrality and

indifference. As Greenfield notes, “In rejecting a single truth, liberalism runs a bit too hastily to the opposite extreme by accepting everything as truth” (48).

In a workshop operating under a liberal paradigm, *all* viewpoints are given space and airtime, and power resides not in the instructor but in all participants equally. Taken to its limit, this position means that even under-reasoned opinions or offensive views—e.g., racist, sexist, homophobic, or transphobic views—are afforded equal consideration and without moderation. A pure liberal workshop model, therefore, offers no concrete solutions for the instructor to argue for what they see as ethical or just; the instructor is meant to facilitate the discussion but must avoid imposing their own personal views. Likewise, it offers no call of action for the instructor to correct for power imbalances between the student whose piece is being workshoped and their workshop peers. Nor does it provide an identity-conscious framework for discussing narratives by marginalized writers and about polemic issues, other than to resort to traditional craft-based discussions.

Returning once again to *In the Dream House*, a workshop instructor under a liberal paradigm would remain powerless to condemn, for example, any sexist or homophobic comments lodged against the manuscript and/or the author. Neither would there be an opportunity for the workshop instructor to facilitate a discussion around the book’s social justice and equality themes or more broadly speaking, the history of neglect and distortion against marginalized voices and stories, since in a liberal-paradigm workshop, the instructor is discouraged from expressing any personal political views.

A Roadmap for a Radical Praxis in Workshop

Given the under-inclusiveness of a conservative paradigm and the over-inclusiveness of a liberal paradigm, and applying Greenfield’s proposal for a radical praxis in writing centers to the context of the creative writing workshop, I advance five core principles intended as a roadmap toward the goal of making space for polemic discourse in creative writing pedagogy. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of

strategies but to contribute to potential reforms to reconsider and reimagine the workshop as a welcoming space for polemic discourse.

Principle #1: A radical praxis workshop foregrounds the polemic issues within a piece, centering the author's intentions.

In such a reimagined workshop, polemic issues arising from a submission are raised and openly discussed in addition to and alongside craft elements. In this respect, issues around social justice, equality, and identity are not, *prima facie*, “off-limit” topics but are given space. Such issues might be framed in terms of the following questions: What are the larger socio-political themes in the piece? From which position is the author writing, and how do their identities and histories inform the piece? What is the author’s positionality vis-à-vis the piece’s subjects? In these discussions, the student-writer should be permitted, and in fact, encouraged, to speak. The student-writer may, at their option, introduce their piece, speak about why they wrote it, in what ways the piece may have stemmed from their own lived experiences or personal observations, what the intended central themes are, thereby, laying out the piece’s worldview. The role of the instructor is to facilitate and give space to the exploration of these questions. In addition to the writer’s presentation, the instructor may wish to summarize what they believe to be the central argument or tension explored in the piece, asking the author and the workshop participants to confirm, revise, or supplement such summary, as appropriate.

Principle #2: A radical praxis workshop recognizes the role of identity within the workshop and in the writing itself.

A radical workshop does not approach a submission from an identity-blind lens; the identities of the writer, the instructor, and all other workshop participants are accounted for. In this regard, Beth Nguyen offers a model for how to discuss both the author’s and the peer reviewers’ respective identities and

backgrounds in the workshop. In writing about how she structures her own nonfiction workshops, she notes: “[W]e [the workshop participants] respected each other’s individual histories, backgrounds, and experiences and understood that our critiques and suggestions were informed by our own backgrounds and experiences.” Nguyen emphasizes how this is particularly important for nonfiction writing where the writing tends to touch directly on more personal experiences and sensitive topics. The role of the instructor then is to create a welcoming space for all identities, including marginalized ones, to be discussed and to acknowledge any limitations or privileges in the instructor’s own positionality. For example, an instructor who is a cis straight man might begin the workshop class involving a piece about domestic abuse in a lesbian relationship (recalling Carmen Maria Machado’s memoir) by acknowledging their own identity. In this regard, Matthew Salesses offers sound advice on how to cultivate an identity-conscious workshop culture: “Acknowledge the culture all the time, including in the bias of the workshop, the makeup of the workshop (usually out of the instructor’s hands), etc., and talk about how that affects the ability of workshop to talk about a particular piece of writing” (*Critical Creative Writing* 10-11).

Principle #3: A radical praxis workshop acknowledges the power dynamics among the workshop participants and how such dynamics may affect the discourse.

A necessary condition for a radical praxis is that everyone assumes responsibility for creating an inclusive atmosphere. That said, while the responsibility is shared it should be weighted based on the inherent power dynamics in a workshop program. In this regard, it is important to acknowledge the relative power of the instructor over students, and in turn, the ultimate power of the directors and leaders of the program and institution. In a radical workshop, all workshop participants should take it upon themselves to engage with the polemic questions in the piece—i.e., ignorance of politics and history cannot be a legitimate excuse to remain silent. This is not the same as requiring that everyone be an expert on all polemic issues, but it does mean that we as members of a creative writing community need to constantly

interrogate our biases and privileges, and to take steps toward developing our understanding of social justice and equality concerns through actively listening, learning, and reflecting.

Principle #4: A radical praxis workshop recognizes intersectionality.

A radical praxis workshop recognizes diversity within intersecting identities and backgrounds. In the context of queer-themed writing, for example, Greenfield points out how the discourse on queerness in America is driven by power positions, and how such discourse has historically been dominated by those whose needs and interests may not be representative of the entire queer community. As a gay Asian-American man, I recognize that queer narratives in America often ignore queers of colors. At the same time, I acknowledge that my lived experiences and the issues I face might differ, and in some cases, significantly so, from others within the queer community. And although I identify as gender queer, I do not claim to be able to speak for, or fully relate to the plight of, queer women, nonbinary, and transgender persons, who must navigate the often hostile political dynamics of sexuality and gender identity. A radical praxis workshop honors and champions the rich diversity of narratives and counternarratives, including respecting and embracing intersectional identities.

Principle #5: A radical praxis workshop promotes ethical awareness and practice.

In a radical praxis workshop, ethical discourse is encouraged and facilitated through an instructor-facilitated, community-based framework. Numerous scholars have offered strategies to promote such discourse. For example, John Duffy in *Provocations of Virtue* offers a six-point framework for the role of teachers in engaging in ethical discourse in the classroom. In summary, these strategies include: *situation* (creating situations for such discussions), *naming* (introducing students to a suggested lexicon by which to center such discussions), *modeling* (modeling language practices and behavior), *exemplars* (employing assigned readings and case studies), *dissensus* (encouraging “productive classroom disputations”), and

institutional culture (promoting a community-based commitment to virtues such as mutual respect, inclusion, and civility) (118-36). These strategies can be introduced and agreed to at the beginning of the workshop class as well as revisited from time to time during the course. They are meant to facilitate healthy discussion and debate in the classroom, to invite generative dissonance rather than contain or suppress divergent viewpoints.

Toward a Radical Polemic-Attuned Praxis

Under this reimagined praxis, I have set out strategies to facilitate this process and enumerate the role of the instructor as an engaged generator and inclusive mediator for polemic discourse. There will be no shortage of polemic writing brought into our workshops, nor should there be, given the complicated world we live in and the intersecting identities we embody. Let us as teachers of nonfiction writing continue to create situations to promote thoughtful and inclusive discourse among our students on issues of significant socio-political resonance. A praxis that embraces rather than obscures the polemic not only serves our student-writers, but also advances the core communal virtues of inclusion, equality, and social justice.

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