

## Writing What Feels (W)Ri(gh)t(e)

In December 2008, the end of the fall semester of my senior year of college, I sat with my mentor Karen Robertson, a professor in both English and Women's Studies and discussed the work my senior thesis would bring in the following months. The plan (because I'm great at making plans, crossing things off lists and marking up spreadsheets) was to devour the words of smart women writers over Vassar's six-week winter break. I bought a shiny red Moleskine notebook dedicated to the cause. I thought about the romantic outcome, the battered binding and scribbled pages with blue ink. Of course, that winter break worked out a bit differently.

I read a few books and articles during those weeks. Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* was finished with relish. As for the red Moleskine, there were certainly a few pages of notes in it. Frankly, handwriting notes in a 5" x 8" notebook is obnoxious. Did I not buy an outrageously expensive Macbook specifically for writing this thesis without the pains of my older machine? I had assembled quite the list of reasons why my thesis wasn't simply *flowing* out of me – my terribly slow reading speed, how personally invested I was in this project and, thus, how scared I was it would turn out poorly, how intimidated I was by the distinction my two best friends had been awarded on their theses. When I returned to school from break and met with Karen again, she ended our meeting with, "I think you just need to **write**." The project itself was *about* writing so her advice was nothing but appropriate. Still, I felt stuck. I turned to Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art."

The art of losing isn't hard to master;  
so many things seem filled with the intent  
to be lost that their loss is no disaster.

Lose something every day. Accept the fluster  
of lost door keys, the hour badly spent.  
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

Then practice losing farther, losing faster:  
places, and names, and where it was you meant  
to travel. None of these will bring disaster.

I lost my mother's watch. And look! my last, or  
next-to-last, of three loved houses went.  
The art of losing isn't hard to master.

I lost two cities, lovely ones. And, vaster,  
some realms I owned, two rivers, a continent.  
I miss them, but it wasn't a disaster.

--Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture  
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident  
the art of losing's not too hard to master  
though it may look like (*Write it!*) like disaster. (Bishop 1527-8)

Afraid of being lost from myself in the midst of the final project of my undergraduate career, I found comfort in this poem, crafted by a fellow Vassar woman. I'd been able to look at the various incarnations of it, her ancient script scrawled on yellowed paper in the College Library Special Collections' "Elizabeth Bishop Papers" collection. Watching her move from one version to the next, feeling a part of her process from first thoughts to polished product, gave me faith in myself as a writer.

I wrote her "(*Write it!*)" on an index card and posted it on the corkboard above my desk.

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I was able to (*Write it!*) at last, a long essay that blended a personal narrative with my own theories on expository writing and the erasure of personal voice in the academy. I crafted an annotated syllabus for a freshman college composition course as

a companion piece. Handing in my thesis felt like an important moment. Receiving distinction for it from Karen helped me see that it was only the first of many similar projects.

I was not the same student after that thesis (that it alone is responsible for my continued status as a student, the reason I applied to graduate school at all, is no small coincidence). Writing free from the expectations of my professors or the academy at large became more than just a choice I've made in all the classrooms I have subsequently been a part of, but also my politics. "Why don't you just write what you want to write?" I've retorted to my fellow graduate students upon hearing complaints about writing "what she [our professor] wants me to." I have committed myself to investigating that which interests me and writing about those things without undue concern for the expectations put upon me by the professors for whom (ostensibly) I am writing. I have chosen to write for myself and this has felt like one small way I could shake off the masculinist traditions of the classroom and the academy. My education has become solely my own.

But then I confronted poetry again. Not just poetry, but poetry as necessity – Audre Lorde's "Poetry is Not a Luxury." Like Bishop's "(Write it!)," Lorde's "it feels right to me" has changed my relationship with my writing, turning it on its head (Lorde 37). That thesis, the feather in my proverbial academic cap thus far, was about *what* I wanted to write about. I wrote it *how* I wanted to write it, constricted by neither conventions of critical writing nor creative writing. But I've been haunted wondering if I wrote what *felt* right to me.

So I have undertaken, here, an attempt to put forth a theory on how we can help our students write what feels right to them. I say “our” as a hopeful future academic and former writing consultant in the Vassar College Writing Center. Exploring these dynamics around writing – peer consultant and professor, respectively, with college students, has highlighted for me the collective process that writing can be. Being thoughtful of how this sort of process can be instructed seems crucial. The very notion that this is something that *could* be taught seems problematic at the least, however. To know what feels right, one must first know oneself. Is this a fair expectation to lay upon the shoulders of such young adults as typify college composition classrooms and undergraduate writing centers? Lorde’s call for us to do what “feels right” to us necessitates “train[ing] ourselves to respect our feelings and...transpos[ing] them into a language so they can be shared” (37). The project of “writing what feels right” is thus twofold: helping students identify their feelings as a legitimate source of knowledge and then enabling their ability to voice these feelings.

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The devaluing of feeling in academic discourse has been a persistent problem. The domination of men, mostly upper class white men, within the European-American traditions of the academy is the root cause of this alienation from affect among students. Lorde helps elucidate this point. “When we view living in the European mode only as a problem to be solved, we rely solely upon on our ideas to make us free, for these were what the white fathers told us were precious” (37). Deemed a feminine attribute, a part of the female component of the male-female mind-body split, feeling and affect are looked down upon when held up against rationality and argument. Thus, students who

might want to express how they *feel* in reaction to a close reading of Maya Angelou's "I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings," instead bypass that "dark...ancient...and...deep" reaction to instead voice the important use of rhyme, for fear of "see[ing them]selves diminished...by the falsely benign accusations of childishness, of nonuniversality, of changeability of sensuality" (37-38).

In her "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power," Lorde calls the externally imposed divide between "the spiritual and the political" damaging, manufactured (56); in the case of learning and producing knowledge, we can easily replace "spiritual" and "political" with "emotional" and "rational," respectively, in the same formulation. This divide has long disempowered those with 'different' ways of knowing and expressing their thoughts (read: those with non-masculine ways of understanding and arguing). In previous work as a writing consultant, I was constantly pushed up against this divide. "Can I say 'I' in a paper? I was always taught never to say 'I' in a paper," they declared. And I had to wonder, *who* did they think was writing their ten to twelve page analyses of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream?" The way writing is taught has encouraged a split consciousness between how we *feel* about the learning we do and how we *write* about it; the "lack of concern for the erotic root and satisfactions of our work is felt in our disaffection from so much of what we do" (55). These student writers were undoubtedly alienated from their own affect, a result of the ways in which we have taught them to write. Young people have been taught to distrust their "nonrational knowledge," for it *is* still knowledge even if it can't be mapped from point A to point C; we have driven them nearly insane (53). Everyday, as authorities in their classrooms,

professors are asking students specifically to silence the gut voice that might say, “This feels wrong to me.” To borrow Lorde’s own erotic words again,

When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual’s. (58)

When a student is asked to write solely from a professor’s directive, she is asked to live outside of herself, to put down on paper a version of herself that is false. To be a thinking self in the academy is essential; to divorce this thinking self from the erotic self is disastrous. Undergraduates become hysterics, blindly focused on “What does she [my professor] want in this paper?,” incapable of asking “What do *I* want in this paper?”

To write what *I* want in an academic paper, to engage in the eroticism of “what feels right to me,” requires a certain level of selfishness, one might say. It must come from a drive to do what is essential for one’s *own* fulfillment as a student. From personal experience, I know this cannot happen without first declaring your education your own.

It took me some time to make this kind of declaration, too long considering the great opportunity I was given as an undergraduate. I spent the first two years of my Vassar career lost in a thick haze of heterosexual romance and the directives of authority figures. Validation came easily from others; a summer break up and a new job in the Center started junior year without as many others to validate me. With freedom from my relationship came the ability to invest in myself as a person and, crucially, as a student. It was only then that I was able to force myself to *live* in my essays, to no longer be an invisible writer of “nice,” polite criticism. In a talk given at the Douglass

College Convocation on September 6, 1977, Adrienne Rich spoke to the all-female audience of students about this very thing – claiming an education.

You cannot afford to think of being here to *receive* an education; you will do much better to think of yourselves as being here to *claim* one. One of the dictionary definitions of the verb “to claim” is: *to take as the rightful owner; to assert in the face of possible contradiction*. “To receive” is *to come into possession of; to act as receptacle or container for; to accept as authoritative or true*. The difference is that between acting and being acted-upon, and for women it can literally mean the difference between life and death. (Rich 231)

This “being acted-upon” that Rich refers to is a direct result of being told *how* to experience one’s education, for example, being told to silence the “nonrational knowledge” in favor of rationality free from affect.

While claiming an education for oneself is without a doubt a uniquely personal task, professors can foster environments that encourage their students to take ownership of their work. Rich refers to this as the “ethical and intellectual contract between teacher and student” (231). In order for this relationship to foster the sort of guided self-investment that could lead to claiming an education and writing what feels right, this “contract must remain intuitive, dynamic, unwritten; but we must turn to it again and again if learning is to be reclaimed from the depersonalizing and cheapening pressures of the present-day academic scene” (231).

Thus, if we teach our students to trust their feelings and encourage them to take a hold of academia for *themselves*, we can put them well on their way to writing what feels right to them. What of this project, specifically, though? What does it look like to write what feels right? Is it an easier process than writing what feels right to someone else? Does it feel like a more natural way to produce knowledge? I here feel the need to claim

that this type of endeavor is, in fact, one of the hardest to undertake. Moving past the bare minimum of the requirements for “good writing” within higher education (for how hard is it really to produce a five paragraph essay with moves from introduction to conclusion that will garner one a satisfactory grade?), requires great effort. It takes a lot of energy to remain invested in every word, turn of phrase, twist in argument.

It is never easy to demand the most from ourselves, from our lives, from our work. To encourage excellence is to go beyond the encouraged mediocrity of our society is to encourage excellence. But giving in to the fear of feeling and working to capacity is a luxury only the unintentional can afford, and the unintentional are those who do not wish to guide their own destinies” (Lorde 54).

Working *beyond* capacity thrusts the writer into the throes of growing pains, into an intimate, often agonizing, relationship with one’s own words and reflections on a text or discipline. Rich calls this writer “that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together” in her essay, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (39). Lorde’s invocation of destiny is no accident – lives are transformed when we open our eyes to what we really want, for it is only then that we realized what we can *have*.

It is likely, then, that to succeed in “writing what feels right,” one must re-imagine one’s self. ‘Am I a writer? For what purpose do I write? Am I doing a greater service to myself or the world around me by writing from the erotic?’ To navigate these questions and the myriad others that arise when writing from one’s gut in conjunction with one’s brain, the student writer must be willing to constantly negotiate the answers. The erotic writer’s subjectivity is not fixed, stable, staid. In theoretical terms, this writer must embrace a multiple subject. In “Re-Imagining the Feminist Subject,” Moya Lloyd’s understanding of the multiple subject is

produced across, and positioned within, several (sometimes reinforcing, sometimes conflictual) axes. The subject is, thus, in a continual state of flux. This is aptly captured in the image... of the self as a combination of acetate transparencies: 'layers and layers of lines and directions that are figured together and in depth, only then to be rearranged again.' Such selves are never fixed. (Lloyd 15; Elspeth Probyn cited in Lloyd)

If we can embrace ourselves as fluid, mercurial, unfixed, we can more willingly write from an erotic knowledge. We need not know all of the answers to write what feels right. Let this not suggest, however, that "writing what feels right" does not *produce* knowledge. Unfortunately, current conceptualizations of academic writing focus solely on the product and the audience instead of the process and the writer. It is indeed possible to contribute to an ongoing intellectual debate while writing from an authentic place. By disallowing knowledge production to become a performative act, we can conceive of writing as an act of love, love of ourselves and the academic community of which we are a part. For marginalized voices and disciplines that seek to invoke change outside of the academy (namely feminist and queer studies), this act of love is essential to academic practice.

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And once again, in my endeavor to write from my own authenticity, I have simply raised more questions than I have answers. I am still no closer to an actualized set of teaching practices for a the theory of "writing what feels right." Because so much of it stems from personal choice and need, perhaps all I can do is present this practice as an alternative in my own classroom, with the hope that the nonrational knowledge of at least a few students will make its way into the academy.

Works Cited

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