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"Poetry Is Not a Luxury": Why We Should Include Poetry In the Writing Classroom

Cover Page Footnote

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“Poetry Is Not a Luxury”: Why We Should Include Poetry in the Writing Classroom

Nicole Warwick

The white fathers told us: I think, therefore I am. The Black mother within each of us—the poet—whispers in our dreams: I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom.

Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury”

...and we all shared a war against the tyrannies of silence.

Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action”

Recently, the director of the composition program where I teach sent out a link to an editorial piece from *Salon*. She explained the piece wasn’t a new conversation but that it was a conversation still worth having. In “Death to High School English,” Kim Brooks ponders the effectiveness of traditional high school curriculum, with its focus on “standardized test preparation and the reading of canonical texts” (par. 2). She questions these practices because she believes they may lead to “the creation of a generation of college students who, simply put, cannot write” (par. 2).

As evidence for her claim, she mentions “their shocking deficits,” “all the things they don’t know how to do when it comes to written communication in the English language,” as well as “all the basic skills that they surely need to master if they are to have a chance at succeeding in any post-secondary course of study” (par. 3). But her diatribe against this generation of students does not end there. She continues:

I’ve stared at the black markings on the page until my vision blurred, chronicling and triaging the maneuvers I will need to teach them in 14 short weeks: how to make sure their sentences contain a subject and a verb, how to organize their paragraphs around a main idea, how to write a working thesis statement or any kind of thesis statement at all. They don’t know how to outline or how to organize a paper before they begin. They don’t know how to edit or proofread it once they’ve finished. They plagiarize, often inadvertently, and I find myself, at least for a moment, relieved by these sentence- or paragraph-long reprieves from their migraine-inducing, quasi-incomprehensible prose. (par. 4)

The impetus for such a view and for such teaching as she describes above are the “professors in every area and every discipline telling them they’re going to fail if they don’t learn how to write a comprehensible, grammatical and at least marginally organized academic essay” (par. 9). So she wonders if reading Faulkner will really help students meet these demands in college (par. 10).

As I read Brooks, I wonder what she will put in the place of reading canonical texts. Apparently more lessons on punctuation: “Wouldn’t they have been better off, or at least better prepared for the type of college work most will take on (pre-professional, that is), learning to support an argument or use a comma?” (par. 10).

My director is right. This is an old story. It is also a dominant one, and it always seems to follow the same plotline: College writing teachers blame high school teachers for the inadequacy of student writing. We know this conversation has been happening at least since the late 1800s when such beliefs led Harvard to institute an entrance exam in hope of getting high schools to better prepare students for writing.

The plot line is also partly based on what Mike Rose calls the myth of transience: “. . . the belief persists in the American university that if we can just do x or y, the problem will be solved—in five years, ten years, or a generation—and higher education will be able to return to its real work” (355). Rose continues:

Each generation of academicians facing the characteristic American shifts in demographics and accessibility sees the problem anew, laments it in the terms of the era, and optimistically notes its impermanence. No one seems to say that this scenario has gone on for so long that it might not be temporary. (355)

I also believe that something deeper is at work in Brooks’ story and stories like hers—something that underlies the plotline and the myth—something that creates the very lens through which we look: a position of power and privilege. Teachers looking through this lens measure students against themselves, their values, their very ways of being and often find students lacking, deficient.

Writing through a Transnational Lens

Transnational theory has been useful to me as I have tried to understand the position which allows the perspective of deficit to persist and as I have tried to think of alternative ways to think of students and their writing.

Transnationalism is often linked to the crossing of national borders. For instance, Wendy S. Hesford and Eileen E. Schell explain: “*Transnationality* refers to movements of people, goods, and ideas, across national borders . . .” (463). However, according to Jacqueline Meisel, transnationalism can relate to border crossings of any kind. She writes: “The larger topic of Transnationalism refers to a variety of activities, singly or in combination, that have to do with actual and metaphorical border-crossings: economic, political, cultural, and personal” (Chapter 5, par. 1). Students are border crossers in the traditional sense as they travel from various countries, states, and even cities to attend college, but they are also border crossers in a broader sense as they cross over into the university system.

By seeing entering college as a transnational event, as writing teachers we gain access to different frameworks and conversations and new ways of thinking and talking about writing with our students and each other. For instance, Francoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih’s article “Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally” has been instrumental in helping me articulate why I find pieces like Brooks’ so troubling. This article has also helped me to reinvent and restructure my classroom through the use of poetry and has helped me to understand and explain in this essay why poetry can function in such a way.

In their article, Lionnet and Shih provide an important critique of transnational theory when they contend that within transnationalism, minor or marginal groups are

almost always defined in relation to major or dominant groups: "We study the center and the margin but rarely examine the relationships among different margins" (2). Minor groups are either seen as assimilating or resisting (Lionnet and Shih 7). They are constantly being measured against the dominant:

The logic of globalization is centripetal and centrifugal at the same time and assumes a universal core or norm, which spreads out across the world while pulling into its vortex other forms of culture to be tested by its norm. It produces a hierarchy of subjects between the so-called universal and the particular, with all the attendant problems of Eurocentric universalism. (5)

This applies to Brooks' view of student writing. She creates a vortex as she uses her power and privilege as a reference point, measuring student writing, even other teachers, against her values.

What is missing from this view of transnationalism, Lionnet and Shih explain, "is an awareness and recognition of the creative interventions that networks of minoritized cultures produce within and across national boundaries" (7). Minor groups are capable of existing, creating, working, and building beyond the scope of the dominant. That is, their existence does not depend on the dominant. Lionnet and Shih suggest we need to stop constructing minorities only in relation to the dominant. Lionnet and Shih offer this view of the transnational instead: "The transnational, on the contrary, can be conceived as a space of exchange and participation wherever processes of hybridization occur and where it is still possible for cultures to be produced and performed without necessary mediation by the center" (5).

Such an insight is important as we think about our students and their writing lives. It reminds us that they write across borders in many ways, in multiple languages and various genres. Perhaps it is our view of writing that is narrow. If we broaden our scope beyond dominant values, what might we see? What might we learn?

I contend that asking such questions not only requires a different perspective, like the one offered by Lionnet and Shih, but requires a different way of being on the part of both student and teacher. Where globalization or nationalism privileges one way of being over another, transnationalism hinges on mutual respect. To be transnational, we can neither overvalue nor undervalue our own ideas or the ideas of others, neither sacrificing our perspective for another nor expecting another to sacrifice their perspective for ours. The goal of the transnational is conversation, negotiation, and hybridity, not assimilation and not even opposition to the dominant. "Critiquing the center," write Lionnet and Shih, ". . . seems only to enhance it; the center remains the focus and the main object of study" (3). We need to divert our gaze from the center. We need to look elsewhere.

Of course, discussing teaching in terms of vertical and horizontal relationships and mutual respect is not new. I first learned about such approaches from educational theorists like Paulo Freire and bell hooks, but what has been a challenge for me is how to approach teaching horizontally, inclusively in my own classroom. Studying the nature of transnationalism with its aim of hybridity has helped me understand the way of being that allows for transnational exchanges to occur, has helped me challenge the view of teaching writing Brooks presents and has helped me create with my students new stories

about teaching writing. But to do so, I need to move beyond the major-minor dichotomy. I need to relate to students differently, see their writing differently. I need to stop constructing their identities in relation to me as teacher and the dominant writing values of the university. I need to work on seeing myself in them and them in me.

Poetry helps me do this work.

I believe poetry helps me transform my teaching and my classroom because it is transnational in nature. According to Adrienne Rich “. . . most often someone writing a poem believes in, depends on, a delicate, vibrating range of difference, that an ‘I’ can become a ‘we’ without extinguishing others, that a partly common language exists to which strangers can bring their own heartbeat, memories, images of strangers” (“Interview” 86). Rich describes a transnational way of being. Such a way of being is antithetical to the vortex; it is horizontal.

Poetry also helps us challenge the vertical structure. We create a vortex when we use only one point of reference as measurement, but by inviting poetry into my classroom, I provide another point of reference. Poetry becomes a counterbalance to academic writing. It’s writing that speaks to us without introductions and thesis statements and topic sentences and paragraphs. It gives us a sense of other possibilities in writing. However, poetry presents but one possibility. Once we introduce another reference point, we break free from measuring against the dominant and find even more points of reference. For instance, each student’s writing and ideas become possible reference points, as do other writers.

In *The Peaceable Classroom*, Mary Rose O’Reilley asks: “What would it be like to teach from the conviction that our students are artists, poets, indeed, from the knowledge that we ourselves are poets? How would that philosophy change the classroom?” (87). I write this essay in answer to O’Reilley’s question.

Being Transnational

When I read the work of Katie Wood Ray, I see her occupy a transnational way of being. In *Wondrous Words*, Ray writes about one of her students, Justin, a fifth-grader who is inspired to write his own poem after reading Georgia Heard’s poetry. At first Justin is perplexed by Heard’s poem, “The Frog Serenade.” This poem is written for two voices, and he doesn’t know how to make sense of it. Ray then sits down with Justin and teaches him to read this poem. Once Justin understands the concept, they read the poem *together* and then perform the poem two more times as other students gain interest.

At the end of the class, Justin runs up to Ray and hands her a poem he has written. It is a two-voiced poem called “Something Dead” about deer hunting in his community:

As I read through ‘Something Dead’ I knew that I was experiencing one of those moments we all live for as teachers. Right before my eyes I was watching a child do something he couldn’t have dreamed of doing only an hour before. I mean, he had never *seen* a poem like this. In one short hour Georgia Heard had given Justin a new vision of what was possible in writing, and Justin had used that vision to see his way into saying a big important thing in his life: *People are cruel—Boom—Men come with deer.* (6)

Ray plays an important role in this narrative. She introduces the tools that will help provide students with ideas and ways of writing. She also offers help in using these tools. However, she is not the only one responsible for the learning and the writing experience that takes place. Justin also has agency in this story. Ray brings the book of poetry, but it is Justin's curiosity and interest that lead him to pick up the book and thumb through it. When he becomes confused, Ray notices, takes on the role of mediator by showing Justin a way in, but she then retreats and lets him read and work with his friends and on his own. Ray also does not offer Justin prescriptions for writing, nor does she foist Heard upon Justin, telling him to learn to write poetry by reading Heard.

Of course we could say that Ray is telling the story from her perspective, but while she tells the story, she also shares the narrative space with Justin. Prior to the passage I quote, Ray reprints Justin's poem in the book, both in print and an actual image of his writing. I also notice the respectful way Ray writes about Justin and the way she honors him by speaking of *his* difficulty and later, but not seen here, her own difficulties as a teacher.

On the page, Ray maintains a fine balance between the different actors involved—Justin, Ray, and Heard. They all foster Justin's poem in some way, but none eclipse each other's work or the work Justin has to do as a writer. Justin is responsible for his learning, his experience, his writing, yet simultaneously he has a community that supports him, helps him learn, and also learns from him. I imagine she teaches and writes from the same place—a transnational place.

I aim to approach teaching writing from the same place as Ray, but this isn't always easy, and for me, it's a conscious choice I need to make every time I design a lesson or assignment or respond to student writing. I actively create room for the struggles they need to experience as writers as well as the answers they find on their own, even when I don't agree. To make our writing classroom work and move forward, we need the tension between our differing views. It's not that I sit idle when I disagree or if I think I might see a better way. I offer my opinion, but I'm also careful to find ways to not let my opinion swamp theirs. I create the opportunity for conversation and negotiation, and for this to happen, we all need to participate.

I begin to create this environment by starting the semester with the poem "It's a Woman's World" by Eavan Boland, a poem Hephzibah Roskelly and David Jolliffe inspired me to use. They include the poem at the back of their textbook *Everyday Use*, as one of the suggested readings for students. I remember reading it for the first time and the difficulty I experienced in trying to interpret its many layers of meaning. I continue to use this poem because of the difficulty I once experienced, believing that working through something difficult together helps us to build community. With its ambiguity, its multiple layers of meaning, poetry resists certainty, resists being figured out. This allows students the opportunity to find their own connections, foster their own ideas, learn to trust themselves but also be open to what others have to say, much like Ray did with Justin.

These aspects are critical for making writing and growth as writers possible. Much like participating in a conversation or negotiation, students need to value themselves and their own ideas to generate content on the page. To test their writing and grow in understanding, however, they also need me, the rest of the class, and the other writers

and theory we work with. But if I'm working with a student, I also need them to be able to withstand the weight of my opinion. I need them to put my opinion about their writing in conversation with their own ideas and the other ideas they encounter in class. As much as I try to make my feedback non-authoritative, the very fact it comes from me can make it difficult to ignore or disagree with. But being able to do this—consider and yet resist other people's views of writing—is critical to success as a writer.

We begin to learn together in this way by first working with Boland's "It's a Woman's World." Based on my own experiences with the poem and the students I have worked with, I know the poem is difficult. We are going to have to build connections and understanding, and we are going to need each other.

We often begin with the first stanzas:

Our way of life
has hardly changed
since a wheel first
whetted a knife.

Well, maybe flame
burns more greedily
and wheels are steadier
but we're the same . . .

When we read the poem, students often wonder how wheels can be steadier while "we're the same." Steadier implies change which contradicts "the same" in the next line. And we read on, still questioning. What does "milestone" mean when Boland turns it into a verb? What's "gristing"? What does it mean "to moth"? If the poem is about women, why are children the ones who are mothed and not daughters? What's a "stargazer," "a burning plume," "a fire-eater"? How can someone be defined by what she forgets?

When we begin to analyze the poem, I first have students write their own questions, and the above questions are some of the things they wonder about. Before we even get to that, though, I try to demonstrate ways they might connect to the poem and places where they might find their own answers.

I discovered my own connection to the poem through music a couple of years ago when I happened to hear Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'" soon after we finished working with "It's a Woman's World." As I listened to Sinatra's lyrics, I noticed both Boland and Sinatra use repetition, nouns as verbs, metaphor, and fire imagery. So before we begin analyzing the poem, I first show a YouTube video featuring Sinatra singing the song. As soon as I play the video, the atmosphere in the classroom changes. Students sit forward. They smile. They are interested and engaged.

I also create a handout with the lyrics, which provides the basis for the first group work of the semester: analyzing the song with the use of the journalist questions. It's our first walk into ambiguous territory. The most difficult question for them to answer is "how," and I respond with phrases they will hear over and over again throughout the semester: "There isn't a right answer. Trust yourself. Let's see what happens." They

always come up with something to say. From these simple song lyrics and questions, they always generate ideas, enough to fill the chalkboard.

As we make the transition from music to poetry, I demonstrate that we bring to the reading of poetry knowledge based on previous learning experiences; we don't arrive at the reading of a poem empty handed. It's important to recognize and point out to students that we do have prior knowledge and experiences we can access to help us find ways into the poem, any text for that matter, even our own writing. We begin to see how we can blend traditional approaches with new, creative ones.

I see the use of music and the transition to reading the poem much like the moment Ray sits down with Justin to teach him how to read "Frog Serenade." Once I show them some possible connections, I retreat to allow them to create their own connections and find their own ways in. It seems to work. In conversations on their blogs about the poem and in class and even in papers they write later in the semester, students often bring up Tupac Shakur's music and poetry, for example. Students also make connections to songs that carry similar messages to the poem. One semester, a student asked if she could play a song in class that reminded her of "It's a Woman's World," while another discussed on our class blog how themes of discrimination against women connected "It's a Woman's World" and the movie *The Changeling*.

After making our initial contact and connections with the poem, I ask students to develop questions they have about the poem. I think it's important that their questions drive our class discussion. Developing their own questions is a way of investing in the poem, to generate knowledge and their own understandings, which is important for them to see as writers.

This semester, for her literacy narrative, one of my students wrote about how she learned in her writing class from the previous semester the importance of students asking their own questions because, she explained, questions are the key to learning. Her paper made me think about how students answer a lot of questions throughout their education, but they often are not questions that come from the students' own interests and curiosity; they are questions their teachers ask. So not only do teachers pick the books students read. They develop questions about the books they've picked. Where are students present in such an education? Where do they get a chance to develop and follow their own curiosity?

I think of Justin in this instance. It was his curiosity which led him to pick up Heard's book of poetry. Ray brought the book and helped him over an obstacle to reading, but it was his interest and excitement that fueled his learning.

This is why I have students develop their own questions. When I first started working with poetry, I was afraid to let go of control. What if we didn't have anything to talk about? What if we didn't cover the "important" stuff? What if they didn't ask "good" questions? As it turns out, they often ask better questions than I do, and we cover more territory quicker and more thoroughly. Most importantly, they learn that questions generate knowledge and questions foster engagement, because as my student so thoughtfully pointed out, questions are the key to learning.

Once we have questions to work with, we begin the work of answering the questions they have developed. We do this work first in groups and then each group shares their ideas with the class. Once we come back together as a class, the groups find that

they have covered similar territory and have often developed similar insights. We reach a general consensus (though no one is obligated to agree) about many of the sections of the poem. Our consensus then gives us the courage to move on to the sections that remain elusive.

As we move into the areas of the poem that are less clear, someone will have ideas about a line that someone else finds inscrutable, and someone else will have an insight about a different section. But something is giving them the courage to speak, to offer *possible* ideas about what a line or word means. It's as though the community and the answers we have found together give us courage to move on and find more answers to our questions. Our discussion also does not become about right and wrong. It's about finding answers and learning *together*. It's about participating in a conversation, negotiation even. The class begins to see how we can learn as a community and how they don't have to rely on the teacher for all the answers.

Besides providing community, the infusion of poetry and music makes writing possible in other ways. For the second paper of the semester, a rhetorical analysis, many students choose their favorite songs as their subjects. Many seem to find this writing meaningful. For one student, rhetoric allowed her to explore the political nature of Los Guaraguao's Salvadorian music. For others, rhetoric allows them a different perspective of something familiar. One student, for instance, wrote about a song her mother sang to her. She focused on her perspective, the perspective of her mother, as well as the perspective of a friend she grew up with. In thinking about this song rhetorically, she was able to think about the song in a way she never had. She had always been the one on the receiving end and hadn't thought about what the song meant to her mother or to people who happened to be around.

This same student also explored music in her literacy narrative, the third and final paper, writing about her own process and development in writing music lyrics and then drawing parallels between writing music and writing papers. Another student also wrote about music for the literacy narrative, exploring how punk music taught him that first someone needs to be accepted by the system, and once he is accepted, he can then go about changing it. He connected this philosophy to his experiences writing in high school and college and how this message from punk music helped him accept and value his own writing even when his teachers didn't.

Windows to the World

Boland explains "that poems are agents of change" and that "there is no doubt the poets of the Harlem Renaissance opened a new window—not just to their own world—but to a wider world as well" (135). The more I work to understand poetry and its nature and background and history, the more windows I see it opening for both me and my students.

In addition to providing ways to build community and conversation with each other, poetry provides a window into conversing about the very issues we face as writers and teachers of writing. We can talk about norms and expectations, how those norms and expectations impact us, and what possible responses are available to us. Much as students and writing teachers who are often subjected to the universalizing influence of a

vortex (in this case, the vortex of academic writing), so too have poets and poetry felt this pressure.

In fact these themes are present in “It’s a Woman’s World.” How easy it is to draw parallels between the devaluing of self as woman and the devaluing of self as writer when we measure ourselves against the dominant norms and expectations of society. As Boland, to speak our truths as writers, to “score the low music of our outrage,” we must be “fire-eaters” and “star-gazers.”

Studying poetry helps us gain the courage to speak our truths because in poetry we find alternate stories and perspectives about writing difficulties. For instance, in an interview with Rich, Audre Lorde talks about how difficult prose was for her to write. Between writing her first story, “La Llorona” and writing “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” in 1977, there was a gap of about twenty-four years. She explains to Rich: “. . . it wasn’t that I didn’t have the skills. I knew about sentences by that time. I knew how to construct a paragraph. But communicating deep feeling in linear, solid blocks of print felt arcane, a method beyond me” (87). Lorde’s story gives us, both teacher and student, a new perspective on what might be behind our difficulty as writers—difficulty others might label as deficit. Lorde’s story reminds me to ask students to tell the story of their difficulty. I hope it also gives students the courage to speak.

Sometimes in resisting the dominant story about writing classes and writing teachers and the students with whom we work, I become afraid. Sometimes, the first seven weeks of the semester are the most difficult as I try to establish a different way of being a teacher and help my students do the same as students and writers. Against moments when I become afraid that a transnational approach to teaching writing will not work and against moments when my first reaction to student writing sounds more like Brooks than Ray, I have to stay firmly grounded in my commitment to the way of being I have chosen. I have learned that my doubt often comes from fear—fear of not measuring up to what the university expects of me or my students.

But then I remember to respect and trust myself and the students. They do turn in work that I find confusing, that is underdeveloped, that sometimes is riddled with error. What I have to tell myself and them is that what I am seeing in their writing is not a reflection of bad teaching on my part or deficit on theirs. These difficulties are to be expected. I have to tell myself a different story, help myself and help them see their writing from a different perspective.

Edouard Glissant in *Poetics of Relation* explains that horizontal, transnational relationships work by “prompting the knowledge that identity is no longer completely within the root but also in Relation” and that “by taking up the problems of the Other, it is possible to find oneself” (18). Teaching students about writing is not just about what I know or what I see. I have to teach in relation to my students. I have to work with them, work to understand the stories their writing tells me, instead of making assumptions about it. I don’t know until I ask, and poetry and stories like Lorde’s remind me to ask, remind me to let them help define my teaching.

Student language often is like poetry—raw and unruly. Sometimes students break rules in their writing, like Boland who uses nouns as verbs, “milestoning” and “gristing” and “mothing.” We know students often occupy a space between their home language(s)

and English. It makes sense that hybrid writing would grow from this space. Poetry helps me consider the possibilities this writing presents.

Thinking of Lorde and her experiences also keeps me from filling in the blanks too quickly about what might be going on in student writing. As I have illustrated throughout this essay, the writing teacher's default mode often seems to be "deficit," something lacking on the part of the student. Lorde's story asks us to think otherwise, asks us to consider other possibilities.

A Counter-narrative

Just last semester in my basic writing class, I worked with a student named Raymond. He sat in the back of class. I felt him daring me to prove something, but I wasn't sure what. I suspected I would need a crowbar and some really strong rope to get him to engage. He seemed to resist everything. He wouldn't have drafts for peer review and only a couple paragraphs for his final draft. Only five or six weeks into the semester, warning bells were going off in my head. I asked him to meet with me because I was worried that he going to have a tough time passing the class.

Immediately after class, we headed to my office. I expressed my concern, especially about what was happening in the final draft of the first paper. I shared that the program expects three or four pages. Early in the semester, two pages is typical. One page is cause for a little more concern. I wanted to find out his story. I asked him, "What's going on?"

It turned out I didn't need a crowbar after all. I just needed to ask. He unloaded his fears and concerns about coming to college. He didn't feel prepared. He felt he didn't know how to write. He couldn't get anything on the page because of his fear. I think this is what Lorde suggests when she writes:

The way you get people to testify against themselves is not to have police tactics and oppressive techniques. What you do is build it in so people learn to distrust everything in themselves that has not been sanctioned, to reject what is most creative in themselves to begin with, so you don't even need to stamp it out. (102)

He had his laptop with him, and I asked him to bring up his paper. He had all his ideas crammed into one paragraph. Each sentence could be the focus of a paragraph, so I asked him to add some paragraph breaks between those sentences so we could see what he had. Suddenly a paper began to emerge.

We didn't meet again in my office, but I felt after that meeting we understood each other better. I understood the fear that kept him from writing, and I think he understood that I was there to help—but that I was also giving him space to work through the challenges he was facing. I think he needed that space. He needed to be released, at least for a time, from the pressures of expectation.

For the last paper of the semester, he again did not have a draft for peer review, so we talked instead about possible topics for his literacy narrative. In the beginning, he assured me he had nothing to write about, but as we talked, he mentioned the journals he kept in high school. He told me how he used these journals to work through all his problems. He wrote about everything in these journals: academic failures, letters to

friends and girlfriends, poetry. Suddenly I saw this student from a different perspective. He wrote poetry in his journals. Poetry. He was a writer. He was a poet.

Though the dominant story about student writers today would have us believe students can't write because of how much they don't know, I suspect that it is this perspective that often leads to the very problem we as writing teachers are trying to overcome. It silences students, makes them afraid to be who they are.

Poetry, I believe, helps reinstate that trust by showing students another perspective of their writing and by helping teachers create that space mentally as well as in the classroom. It is in this space where we avoid jumping to conclusions about what is wrong, so as to avoid jumping in to fix whatever it is we think is happening. It allows us space to consider other possibilities.

Perhaps that awkward sentence does not stem from some deficiency in grammar, but from struggling with an idea. Or perhaps that fragment is intentional, or should be intentional. And even if a student is struggling with fluency in English, to really make a difference, the request for help should come from her. I find my students ask for help more frequently and are much more receptive to the knowledge and perspective I have to offer if it comes from a place where we make a commitment to learn from each other, instead of a place of judgment and measurement—if it comes from a place that is poetic, transnational.



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