

Portrait of a Poet Educator: Personal and Professional Evolution through the Arts

Shanita Bigelow
DePaul University

ABSTRACT

This narrative is a portrait of a poet and educator. It chronicles—in parts—the author’s journey in and through arts education toward a life of teaching and writing. It includes a poem, “Storied,” placed in parts throughout the narrative. Beneath the surface of life history, teaching experiences and experiences as a student, the author writes, as a foundation, the poem and vignettes to demonstrate the negotiations and practices inherent in shaping her work as an educator. These pieces converge to provide a brief and nuanced look at how education through the arts can lead to personal/professional evolution and a sense of empowerment.

KEYWORDS: art education, poetry, narrative, autoethnography, self-reflection, praxis

And I began to recognize a source of power within myself that comes from the knowledge that while it is most desirable not to be afraid, learning to put fear into perspective gave me great strength.

(Lorde, 2007, p. 41)

I don’t remember the first book I read or the first poem I wrote. I don’t even know the first words I said. I don’t know what came first, what first of many set me on my current path, but I do know what has stayed, what stuck and how to see past present fear, reservation or elation toward possibility—toward something more. Call it hope, call it imagination or foresight. Call it what you will. For me, a Black woman, a poet, an educator, the future has often been a scary place, thus neglected. I learned that to see is more than gauging the present, more than earning the now; it is a remarkable feat of will.

This essay is about my journey. While it’s not a complete portrait, the pieces—narrative in nature, autoethnographic in method—I hope, demonstrate that will and showcase the possibilities, the impact poetry and, by extension, the arts have had on my life—academic

and otherwise. Interspersed throughout is a poem, in parts, called “Storied.” And, there are other refracted reflections of my art educational experiences.

I’ll take breaks throughout the essay for the poem, for vignettes of experiences that have come into focus. These moments or breaks serve as pieces of a larger tapestry, one that reminds me to work and not stop, one that compels me to listen and recognize the positive potential of new modes of learning, teaching, living, being. This narrative, as both story and inquiry, as witnessed and lived, can, as Dalia Rodriquez (2006) wrote, “serve as a powerful means of creating a site of resistance” (p. 1069). Further, she wrote, “storytelling can teach people about how one can construct both story and reality” (p. 1070). That is arts education for me—a site of inquiry and creation. Inquiry in terms of reflexivity and creation in the sense that that inquiry forms a path, a direction for one’s own reality.

I come from a place, a neighborhood, a city many deemed dangerous. There is truth to that. There was much to fear and there were many times when I was afraid. I grew up in a single-parent home. But home was also where I flourished, where I learned to see beyond the danger of the everyday and find, anchor myself in the possibilities of next, of tomorrow.

I’m from a mid-sized urban center in the Southeast. I come from a predominantly Black neighborhood. There was violence and crime. And there were a couple parks nearby and friends and we’d ride our bikes and have cookouts and sleepovers. It is still such a place. It is a place like any other, one that houses the good and bad, one that brings joy and grief, that challenges me to recognize all of that within myself.

So what? Right? Well, exceptionalism aside, some don’t make it. While I’m sure others may say I showed promise, the truth is I struggled early in school in the sense that I didn’t quite fit. Was it not for my mom who cared so intensely she’d do anything to ensure her children’s success, who knows? Whatever promise existed in my brain didn’t come out of my mouth, not much did. I was what most would consider a shy kid, and I avoided class participation for as long as I could. So, there must have been something wrong with me, right? Not so according to my mom, who knew it was just a matter of method and community. She placed her kids in the best possible environments (swim lessons at the YMCA for example), encouraged us to find our own way and surrounded us with care. Seems simple. I knew early how fortunate I was.

With that, I found my way. I read and read and read and I began to write, to journal. I eventually made it into our elementary school’s

afterschool arts program. I continued all of that for as long as I could. While I loved to draw and paint (once I learned), I reveled in words, in books and the blank page.

I began writing to understand the world: the beautiful, the brash—as much of it as I could. I began writing to see me, to hear me more clearly. I continued because it was my method of expression and response. And I remain a writer for many of the reasons Rodriguez outlines: “I write to face my fears...I write to face that which I may have unknowingly repressed for days, maybe years. I write to erase invisibility...and I write to free myself from my inner hidden masks” (p. 1080). Expression is always about and always more than the expressed. So, I write. Some may say, “Well, you had an aptitude for it.” Maybe. But then I say, we all have an aptitude for something. Maybe it’s an aptitude for mechanics or engineering, maybe it’s compassion, maybe it’s simply the ability to listen or synthesize and analyze (and not just in an academic sense), maybe it’s the ability to complicate, to problem solve, to challenge. Whatever it may be, there’s space for its positive development.

I remember sitting in on a graduate level critique as an undergraduate studio art major. The artist rendered three or four portraits of children by using a blowtorch, a medium that required subtle and thoughtful manipulation. The portraits were clear, but light. There was enough contrast to distinguish their faces, to see them. A professor asked the artist why there wasn’t more contrast, why they weren’t as sharp as they could be. The artist responded—and I don’t remember what she said. But I remember wanting to say something like: “Maybe they shouldn’t be so sharp, so defined. They’re kids. They’re still becoming.” At any rate, the lack of definition made sense to me. The delicacy of definition makes sense to me. We owe ourselves and each other time to settle into ourselves. I’m still settling, still trying to find the words to support it.

I began writing to better understand my feelings, family dynamics, school assignments, what I’d read, etc. Writing was the only way to make sense of anything: it helps me to be still and distill experience. Writing is a process for me to better process texts, conversations, life. I found in writing a vessel and a vehicle through which to make sense and explain sense, to make matter and to matter, to make meaning and make meaningful.

Poetry is a tool for making sense. I turned to writing poetry, to reading more of it, to listening to it, to seeking it out. I find joy in it. It is both a deep dive and a wide expanse. I find the concision and precision with which poetry makes its mark—that and the imagery and sound, a coming to/return to the senses—to be a means of recognizing the importance and purpose of intentional reflection.

That a moment in my life or a moment in history, that a painting or a crumpled newspaper or a cup of coffee or loss of any kind or the sound of laughter, can be and remain resonant through the space of time is immensely powerful and heartening. Writing poetry is deep-seated, and at times, painful, difficult, but in the end, there is a sense of elation or more subtly, a genuine sense of calm or contentment.

Storied - Part 1:

My name, the name I'm called slides through teeth, salve of the misinformed me. I can't remember who said it first. I'm all beginnings, so many I've lost track of which follows which, what's to come.

I don't know who I am in the way a person knows exactly where they stand. I question ground, every sod-covered hill: crabgrass mocks how I've come to call myself myself, what captured me in the first place.

Creative assignments come and go in school: dioramas and papier mache masks, comic strips and, in my case, a little poetry collection fashioned in the style of the work of Shel Silverstein. The comic strip I remember featured a black girl named Lucy with an oval face and two ponytails. I don't know why I named her Lucy, but there are times when I look in the mirror and see her joyful face. She was me then, a futurity at the time, but I didn't want to see it that way. I denied her. She was just a character. She was bright-eyed, precocious. She fit in and didn't care. She fit in because she didn't care if she fit in. Her world a mirror to my own, an upside-down response to my middle school reality. And I quietly let her be.

The poetry in me came and went and stayed. And, at some point I acknowledged, accepted and attempted to grow it. Before that, it was just me and my feelings, me unwrapping the world, attempting to fix it together again. Lucy understood it. She stood tall and proud—a me imagined confident, purposeful. I imagine a time, a self capable enough to shoulder all the memory of her, all the weight of her future in my own, my given name, in me—all the joy pronouncing it brings me now.

Recollection assumes both stasis and change. The memory of Lucy, of that assignment, of the unconfident and often ashamed middle-school-me, quiet yet sturdy me, is both horrifying and helpful. I remember as me today, not as me then and so the shift in time necessarily shifts the meaning of that time. It's as if I'm reimagining Lucy, even now, and reimagining middle-school-me.

There was much to learn, much and many to avoid, and I found solace in words and images, in the makings of my own hands, my mind. For my well-being, I imagined myself into a different reality,

constructed one, where danger wasn't as dangerous, and if it was, I knew how to get past it—where my thoughts could subvert its power. My sight shifted. I learned to see differently and as a result, be differently. Adrienne Rich (2009) wrote of the imagination:

Yet the imagination—the capacity to feel, see what we aren't supposed to feel and see, find expressive forms where we're supposed to shut up—has meant survival and resistance... We may view the imagination as a kind of gated, landscaped neighborhood—or as a river, sometimes clogged and polluted, carrying many kinds of traffic, including pollen and contraband, but in movement: the always-regenerating impulse toward an always-beginning future (p. 92-93).

I choose river—the unencumbered and unruly coursing of all things. Nothing is as neat as we think it should be. Art, poetry taught me that—hardship and setback taught me that, and that that's okay. There's a plurality of being identified in the arts, in living and learning through and with them.

I haven't always believed in my future—"always-regenerating": yes; an "always-beginning future": not exactly. Growing up, I took it day by day, moment by moment—still do. I'm only just beginning (and it pains me to write this) to become more exacting about my future—believing in its concreteness. I have a future. I am a future.

There's a part of me that's always known that, hence getting through school, working, trying to be a responsible adult. But all that pollen and contraband, that doubt—a kind of slippage into self-neglect—can take root. I've always written myself, rivered myself through it. Poetry became a vehicle, a tool that translated into / from closer readings of assigned and unassigned texts. Writing felt like everything, but I also had family and supportive teachers and friends. Writing became the place for all that and everything else.

What is it that we possess? I think of students I've worked with, what they consistently brought to the table, what they sought sort of intuitively and sometimes asked for. It pays to pay attention, I've learned. Poetry and art sharpened my sight and hearing, prepared me for change, for perspectival shifts (my own and those of others), for hurt, for the uneventful, and for life's inevitable emergencies.

There is pain in much of my poetry. In sharp contrast to the brightness of Lucy are the estranged shapes of the inner emotive space—the stuff beneath the surface and deeper. I learned through creative exercises, through writing that both the bright and the buried exist simultaneously, that there's a hardiness and elegance to both.

Storied - Part 2:

*I can't whistle. To sound my space, I
swing my arms, one then the other, like oars.
They cut the air, any belief I've held.*

*My story read, re-read—symbol transposed, shared.
Who believes? Story: foresight and oversight, misappropriation
of piedmont and hillock. It's how I roll.*

I've crowded the streets of my learning with all my perceived missteps, all the falls, the near misses, all the questions rendered unanswerable, all the silences I've gripped—still hold onto. Learning as myself is always me learning myself—who I am today, in this space with these people, and what do I have to say, what can I say? Why have I chosen to write into the moment and after? There is something more—a not letting in and/or a not letting go.

Tenth grade English class—American Literature: we read about Robert Johnson at the crossroads between damnation and salvation, between want and responsibility. Our teacher posed a question—straightforward as I remember it. There was no response. I remember being on the edge of my seat, not literally, with a response itching my tongue and yet, the silence remained. We didn't get far into that lesson, and I felt I could've changed that, but I chose not to. Why? I'm asking myself now. I had something to say. What is it that pauses me to the point of no return? What solace is to be found in that kind of pulsing silence? Perhaps it is the pulse itself, a sort of foreground for knowledge in process—taking shape, for the words to one day come, for the thoughts, the self-theorizing to come. Perhaps I imagined myself in Johnson's position between the safety of desire and the fear of responsibility or reality or some other thing that can't quite be named—that thing that pushes us toward decision when decision is uncomfortable.

As I reflect on these educational moments, on my feelings then and now as they come back to me, I'm reminded that reflection can be a guise. As Baszile (2008) wrote of her own experiences in becoming a reflective practitioner: "Reflection—in this sense—often becomes rationalization" (p. 372). She continued, "The question I seek to answer is quite simply, what does teacher reflection work to repress?" (p. 373). What is it, if we take that statement broadly—what is it that I'm avoiding in all of this? What is that I'm not saying? Why?

Storied - Part 3:

*It's how I roll greens, pour rice—the way I say
'See ya' and 'hell.' It's the catch of my t's, real soft
dialectical glitch.*

*Self, myself, the self witnessed in everyone else—
a self most self, enough of her to justify the heat dressing
my tongue.*

As an educator, I've worked with students of all ages. And what propelled the work, what propelled me was simple: I believe in the learning process, and I believe we're all capable of forwarding what we know and what we think we know, toward choice and belief.

Instructors had to find other ways to hear and see me. And they did. For me, the arts provided voice and direction. The arts were the road, the path out—one that is steep and cracked. It has not been an easy way to go. There is, as always, much uncertainty. But what holds one together, what holds me together is that belief, belief in all our knowledges and experiences. And, so as an educator, I had to find other ways too.

As an adjunct instructor at a small midwestern university, I was asked to teach a speech class. Though I felt ill-prepared for such a task, and it showed—my students, that first day of class could sense my nervousness and expressed their own about it. I attempted to reassure them, and by the end of the course, the nervousness—for all of us—had dissipated.

Challenge summons creativity and problem solving. What was I going to do? How does someone who is quiet, who avoids speaking, especially publicly, teach a speech class? Easy. I knew I wasn't the expert, so I went to them—I found them in texts and other media—and we practiced, all of us in different capacities. I learned to be more flexible and confident in my choices, to let go—just a bit.

Storied — Part 4:

*Tell me the story of my story,
the one written in feet—all those miles,
memories and back—weight outlined in soil,
words displayed in ground, in forbearance,
a diptych—above and below.*

Baldwin (1963/2010) wrote, "Art is here to prove, and to help one bear the fact that all safety is an illusion. In this sense, all artists are divorced from and even necessarily opposed to any system whatever" (p. 42). We're a wild bunch, and often sincere in our crafts, honest in our approaches to living and learning, perhaps too prideful in our becoming. I often think I'm not safe. That the illusion of safety is a dangerous trick of the mind. But there's also part of me that requires a brace at the crossroads, something to hold my weight should I waffle too long before choosing a path. I resist systems predicated on a damaging sense of failure, the kind that presumes the only way

forward is already in motion, that there is only one way out. It's the kind of system that perceives me as another of some other; the kind of system that never recovers from its loss of fidelity and innovation—a system without grace.

References

- Baldwin, J. (1963/2010). The artist's struggle for integrity. In R. Keenan (ed.), *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, 41-47. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Baszile, D. (2008). The oppressor within: A counterstory of race, repression, and teacher reflection. *The Urban Review*, 40, 371-385.
- Lorde, A. (1984/2007). The transformation of silence into language and action. In A. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 40-44. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press.
- Rich, A. (2009). James Scully's art of praxis. In A. Rich, *A Human Eye*, 91-95. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Rodriguez, D. (2006). Un/masking identity: Healing our wounded souls. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(6), 1067-1090.