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Applause and Evanescence: An Arts-Based Story of Creating and Performing a Choreopoem with Students in an Urban High School

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ABSTRACT

I combine memoir and essay, affect and argument, in theorizing and narrating the creation and performance of a choreopoem with four Latino and African American students and their drama teacher (Luis) in an urban high school. Drawing on the work of literary and arts-based educational theorists, the verses of African American poets, and a performance project with four adolescents, I first consider the role of feeling as necessary to revealing the sense of connectedness across lives that the literary arts make possible. As a writer, researcher, and teacher committed to embracing artful and emotionally evocative affective discourse, I draw on inquiry and writing-based practices adapted from “narrative ethnography” and “A/r/tography.” As an aesthetic “practice of living enquiry that combines life-writing with life-creating,” A/r/tography conceives arts-based inquiry as entailing aesthetic sensibility, one that is open to curiosity while trusting uncertainty. In this paper, I invite readers to wonder about the literary arts, and the possibility they might offer imaginative routes and visceral itineraries into the emotional worlds of others (e.g. Weinstein, 2003). In doing so, my intent was to embrace artful and affective discourse that might reveal intimate aspects of my writing life, offer occasions for readers to explore the possibilities associated with a literary arts’ experience, invite interpretation of the nature of my engagement with four high school drama students and their teacher, and provoke some essence of immersion, friendship, and solidarity with others in the aesthetic act of creating and engaging in a literary, drama-based project with young people.

Keywords: A/r/tography, Literature Education, Empathy, Poetry, Drama.

JEL Codes: D83, I21, I24, Y92, Z11

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1. Introduction

A story, Robert Coles (1989) once commented, “is not an idea, though there are most certainly ideas in stories . . . reading a story is not like memorizing facts” or analyzing abstract concepts (p. 127).

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I've always loved remembering that line from *The Call of Stories* if only for what it reveals without explicitly stating anything about the mix of emotional, historical, empathetic, and imaginative qualities of knowing that art and literature are believed to evoke. But it is also lovely because his words call to mind an approach to teaching and reading literature that I rarely experienced as a student in any secondary or post-secondary English classroom into which I repeatedly and optimistically hauled an armful of books with little more than my fully intact adolescent imagination as the sole source of sustenance and possibility. It's surprising to realize that after so many years, my specific interest in stories is so easily traceable to *The Call of Stories*, a book I casually read many years ago as an Assistant Professor of language and literacy education in my first academic position. No doubt, my interest in exploring the importance of human feeling as the fundamental communicative force in literature and art, as well as the role of feelings and imagination in reading and teaching stories began unpredictably in my tiny University of Michigan office cubical decorated in the iconic colors of maize and blue.

In writing this essay and the subsequent memoir/story of my experiences as a writer/researcher/teacher, I integrate essayist traditions of humanities' education with arts-based/ethnographic traditions of writing and inquiry (Tedlock, 2018). My concern or contribution throughout is with theorizing and ultimately raising questions related to the value of affect-based approaches to reading, as well as the meanings associated with engaging in a literary, arts-based experience with high school students. In relation to these purposes, much of my work is derived from the research of an interdisciplinary cohort of scholars who have argued that privileging affective modes of engaging aesthetic texts means that literature readers are encouraged to participate in a unique way of knowing/reading that values the importance of human emotions and provides opportunities for accessing the feelings and diverse lived perspectives of others (e.g., Chabot-Davis, 2014; Edmundson, 2005; Jarvis, 2012; McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996; McGinley, Kamberelis, Welker, Kelly, & Swafford, 2017; Mirra, 2018; Nikitina, 2009; Nussbaum, 1995; Weinstein, 2003; Worth, 2008). However, as the popularity of teaching literary theory, especially critical literary theory in English classrooms has increased in recent years (e.g., Appleman, 2009; Gillespie, 2010), the importance of literary perspectives that embrace the value of affect and imagination has been gradually eclipsed, understated, and even caricatured. These unenthusiastic characterizations offer reasons for concern about the fate of more personal (i.e., affective and imaginative) approaches to reading literature (and the arts more broadly). My worry, however, is not so much with celebrating affective engagements over other forms of literary engagement as it is with portraying how its possibilities have been inadequately understood and thus undervalued. In short, there is a need for further examinations that not only provide analytical accounts of literary experiences, but also lived aesthetic/experiential inquiries necessary for revealing some of the insights that affective encounters with stories, novels, poems, and plays might offer. As Tierney (1999) noted in making a case for expanding the narrative possibilities available to writers and researchers across a range of approaches to inquiry, ". . . authors want to create greater narrative flexibility in time, space, and voice. Their assumption is that rather than a standard proof akin to the natural scientists, readers make meaning from emotive and affective aspects of a text (p. 309-310). The creative aesthetic narrative account of my involvement in a literary, drama-based project with high school-aged students offers one example of how an arts-based approach to inquiry, one which prioritizes aesthetic/emotional epistemologies, might invite thoughtful reflection on the potential meanings and complexities associated with exploring affective approaches to inquiry-based writing, reading, and engaging in such a literary, drama-related project with young people.

In this paper, I weave different generative mediums in hopes they offer both reasoned and emotionally tangible occasions through which to reflect on my journey as an academic writer, as well as the creation, rehearsal, and performance a choreopoem in an urban high school. In what ultimately became a mixed-media mosaic cut from essay, memoir, and dramatic performance, I offer the narrative ethnographic account of my academic writing and art-based inquiry experience with four young Latino and African American students as the setting for posing questions designed to encourage affective/emotional inquiry into the potential for creative narratives to inform our lives by imaginatively summoning us into the familiarities of others.

No doubt, this paper begins and builds on a body of largely logical/analytical accounts across several decades that have focused on literature's life-informing possibilities. However, my work also attempts to extend these accounts by recommending that logical/analytical ways of reading and

interpreting texts be “cooperatively mangled” with affective/emotional/aesthetic approaches in order to access some of the potential emotional and empathic affordances of a creative literary experience (McGinley, Kamberelis, Welker, Kelly, & Swafford. 2017, p. 68). As others and I have noted:

Contrary to many advocates of critical approaches to reading . . . we argue that when readers engage both personally and critically with literary texts, imagination, feeling, analysis, and critique are “cooperatively mangled” in powerful ways. This “cooperation” has the potential to fully exploit the both/and ways of knowing (embodied/visceral and analytic/critical) that reading literature affords. (p. 68)

Additionally, I wanted my inquiry into my changing commitments in response to writing, the nature of stories and students’ engagement in them, to be similarly concerned with prioritizing affective, emotional, and aesthetic ways of knowing. Such an approach might offer an aesthetic sense of the significances and possibilities engendered by an arts-related encounter involving myself, students, and their teacher. In writing about this work, I “interweave theory, practice, and poesis, allowing deeper understandings [sensibilities] to emerge over time” (Irwin, 2003; LeBlanc, Davidson, Ryu, & Irwin, 2015, p. 356). I offer these aims and purposes in the spirit of gesturing toward something tentative or uncertain—more in the vein of contemplations to be felt, spoken, or discussed rather than as the basis for questions to be confidently asserted and then answered. In writing and exploring, I sought to emphasize emergence and openness over such conclusion-seeking tendencies (Haberl, 2019). Throughout, I engaged in an emergent and “dynamic process of knowing” enacted across “moments of becoming, one un/folding into the other, blurring the boundaries of each” (Irwin, 2003, p. 200).

As described above, my approach combines both critical/analytical and aesthetic/emotional ways of theorizing and narrating my experience of engaging in a literary, drama-based project. I begin by outlining some recent and not so recent theoretical perspectives aimed at conceptualizing literary reading as involving a kind of emotional and experiential entanglement in the lives of people/characters. As it connects to questions about the potential of literature and writing to inform lives, I then tell the story of my journey as an academic writer, especially as it reveals my developing desire to both occupy and invite readers of my work into a slightly more performative, aesthetic, or interpretative narrative space (e.g., Tedlock, 2018); a space that prioritizes the experience of feeling as a way knowing, reflecting, and making meaning; a space that, according to Finley (2005), seeks to make use of emotional and affective experiences, perceptions, and essences, as well as intellect, as ways of interpreting and responding to others and the world. Next, I discuss two poems, one by Stanley Kuntz and another by Langston Hughes in further naming and exploring my commitments to feeling, to our tectonic and visceral interiors, to the power of creative outreach, and to the “poetic” ways of seeing and doing justice to our depths that the affective realm may make possible. Finally, I present the memoir of my involvement in a literary, drama-based project with high school-aged students and their teacher. This story offers one example of how an arts-based approach to inquiry, which prioritizes aesthetic/emotional epistemologies, might invite critical reflection or action based on the potential meanings and complexities associated with exploring affective approaches to a literary reading and arts-based encounter.

2. Inquiry practices: Narrative ethnography and A/r/tography

As a creative endeavor, my methodological approach to this essay/narrative was influenced by the practices of “narrative ethnography” as described by Barbara Tedlock (2018), as well as the practices of “a/r/tography” as outlined by Rita Irwin (2003) and Susan Finley (2005). According to Tedlock, as a form of creative non-fiction, narrative ethnography seeks to be factually accurate while being written in an imaginative literary style resulting in a story that “is polyphonic with the author’s voice and those of other people woven together (p. 861). As a writer, I sought to privilege narrative techniques designed to cultivate and invite the emotional and empathic engagement of readers (and myself) while at times also including the main principles of expository writing, such as evidence-based claims, and the citation of appropriate sources. Following Tedlock (2018), I set out to create a story-like narrative arc as well as an emotional narrative arc that revealed my own research commitments and inner conflicts related to my experience as an academic writer, my involvement with four adolescent performers, and my sense of the meaning of one literary arts’ project. As I wrote about my experience,

I conceived of “characters, action, and shifting points of view . . . high points and low points of dramatic development including moments of tension and revelation” (p. 860). My goal in doing so was to embrace artful and affective discourse that might reveal intimate aspects of my writing life, offer occasions to explore the possibilities associated with a literary arts’ experience, invite interpretation of the nature of my engagement with four high school drama students and their teacher, as well as perhaps reveal some essence of immersion, friendship, and solidarity with others in the aesthetic act of creating and performing a choreopoem. On the whole, I resist the inclination to engage in any significant analytical commentary about the meaning of my experiences, choosing instead to invite interpretation, dialogue, connection, intimacy, and compassion (e.g., LeBlanc, Davidson, Ryu, & Irwin, 2015; Leggo & Irwin, 2013; Tedlock, 2018).

I also employed the practices of *a/r/tography*. As a form of living inquiry, *a/r/tography* is an arts-based approach to a variety of kinds of qualitative inquiry that values a sense of emergence while choosing to by-pass inclinations for closure and resolution. *A/r/tographers* identify the importance of continued inquiry, curiosity, and becoming without the possibility of reaching a final destination or developing a definitive set of interpretation (LeBlanc, Davidson, Ryu, & Irwin, 2015; Leggo & Irwin, 2013). Throughout my writing and inquiry, I engaged in an emergent and “dynamic process of knowing” enacted across “moments of becoming, one un/folding into the other, blurring the boundaries of each” and complicating the goal of identifying distinct outcomes or judgements about the impact of a creative, literary-based project involving myself, students, and their teacher (Irwin, 2003, p. 200). During this process, I was always conscious of my decision to work within a theoretical framework that approached easy answers and the tendency for sureness with some amount of skepticism, choosing instead to embrace meanings, tensions, complexities, revelations, reverberations, inner emotions, and at times contradictory understandings of my experiences with participants (Irwin, 2003; Irwin & Springgay, 2008; LeBlanc, Davidson, Ryu, & Irwin 2015).

Drawing on approaches and practices derived from narrative ethnography and *a/r/tography*, I invite readers to explore and interpret some of the meanings associated with my own engagement in a dramatic arts-based project, the possibilities associated with a literary arts’ experience, and the nature of the solidarity, admiration, respect, friendship, compassion, and empathy that developed as I engaged with others along the way. After Tedlock (2018), I sought to develop artful discourse as a powerful interpretive genre “infused with the rhetoric, metaphors, and other tropes that are commonly used in lyrical poetry and narrative fiction” (p. 861).

Though my approach to gathering and analyzing sources of data during the choreopoem project was largely unstructured and intuitive, notetaking and writing in my journal were the primary ways I remembered significant moments or aspects that emerged over the course of creating, rehearsing, and performing a literary, drama-based art experience with students. I also engaged in moment-to-moment interviews with students over the course of the project when time and place permitted. I took fieldnotes in wide-ranging and improvisational ways, privileging the insights that arose throughout various performance-related experiences. Initially, I took notes on some of the key conversations I had with students during “poetry/flowetry” workshops at school, and I eventually did the same before, during, and after choreopoem rehearsals. During rehearsals I made observations focused on students’ (and the teacher’s) creative contributions to the original assembled poem script and evolving choreographic decisions, as well as any stories they shared about their lives outside of the project. During rehearsals and based on video documentation from students’ official performance, I took note of facial expressions and body language, collaborative and relational styles, rehearsal-related problems, tensions, and emotions as they provided insight into their affective/art-based sensibilities and their overall feeling on the stage and involvement in the project. I collected creative writing from students and documented any personal or otherwise interesting stories that students and their teacher shared about their lives.

Before, during, and after this paper, I wrote my own poetry focused on the experience of reading stories and my engagement with four students and their teacher during the project. Writing poetry served as an important way for me to enter the dramatic, arts-based experience while also revealing my own commitments and inner conflicts related to my experience as an academic writer, my engagement with the adolescent performers, and my sense of the meaning of the literary, drama-based project. Importantly, I also viewed the actual aesthetic narrative writing in which I engaged throughout

this paper as a source of data. According to Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund (2008) affective writing is much more than a kind of neutral final product that results from the analysis and interpretation of data. As I wrote, my attempts at artful narrative-based prose became a form of data itself—a mode of data creation through which I made sense of my own developing understandings while attempting to capture the experiences of participants. In short, it offered a new way of seeing and imagining (e.g., Leavey, 2009).

3. Stories, feelings, and imagination

Since taking up a number of story/literature-based collaborative research projects in schools and communities, I've benefited from the wisdom and generosity of several remarkable middle and high school English Language Arts teachers and their students who graciously welcomed me into their classrooms in cities across Michigan and Colorado. Facing the persistent and increasing presence of national and state content standards for teaching the English Language Arts, the approaches to literary instruction that these teachers and I struggled to embrace, though not exactly in keeping with prevailing views, conceptualized engagement in literature as an imaginative and emotional endeavor. We hoped these approaches might lead to insights that challenged the capacities of prevailing linguistic ways of portraying and knowing in Language Arts classrooms in favor of something unframed, underneath, or intimate that tugs at one's poetic sensibilities as described by Seigworth & Gregg (2010). We sought to create secondary school literature classrooms that not only acknowledged the value and importance "making space for feeling" (Palmer, 1983, p. 83), but classrooms that also embraced the artful and emotionally-inspired ways of knowing that stories of many kinds (fictional/non-fictional) were capable of engendering.

While engaged in this work with teachers, I recall accidentally finding and excitedly reading *A Scream Goes Through the House: What Literature Teaches Us About Life*, by Arnold Weinstein (2003). Weinstein's thoughtful consideration of the nature of emotion in the visual and literary arts was a revelation for me. The arts, he explained, prioritize feeling as a vital and critical way of knowing and imagining. Stories, poems, or plays are unique in their ability to reveal landscapes of feelings—the feelings of individuals caught up in the emotional exigencies of trying to shape their own affirmative life narratives in response to a diversity of personal, social, cultural, gendered, and economic experiences. Drawing on Weinstein, the perspective I explore in this paper is that a literature or art-inspired journey (and a more creative aesthetic approach to inquiry) may involve readers (and writers) in complex imaginative, emotional, and experiential engagements in the lives of people that not only offer possibilities for new ways of living but possibilities for new ways of encountering the mysterious and imagining the so-called "unexplained." Throughout, I use the word "imagination" to draw attention to one's capacity to see the world "as having the potential to support and sustain novel connections" between and among people and experiences as described by Levi (2019, p. 5) in his recent analysis of the productive dimensions of Jean-Paul Sartre's conception of imagination.

It seemed to clear to me that in this realm literature readers/listeners/viewers are encouraged to practice an approach to knowing that highlights the complexity of human subjectivity and provides them with openings for emergently accessing the inner lives and diverse perspectives of others. As Weinstein and others have suggested, literary experiences may develop our capacity to begin to nascently feel the debilitating perspectives of the lives of people that canonical culture and history so ruthlessly, unconsciously, and instinctively authorize (e.g., McGinley, Kamberelis, & Welker, 2017; Bruner, 1986; Mirra, 2018; Nussbaum, 1995; Smith, 1993). As I have documented and discussed, this way of perceiving requires empathic imagination (McGinley & Kamberelis, 2018; McGinley, Kamberelis, Welker, Kelly, & Swafford, 2017; Kamberelis, McGinley, & Welker, 2015). This sort of compassionate imagination may be essential to democratic equality and social justice because it offers readers a kind of partial access to the feelings and array of lived exigencies of individuals other than themselves. As I propose in a recent paper, this is the process through which literary experiences develop our capacity to imagine beyond the viewpoints that official culture and society sanction while complementing the more analytical forms of investigation associated with critical theoretical ways of reading. As previously described, when readers engage both emotionally and critically with literary texts, "imagination,

feeling, analysis, and critique are ‘cooperatively mangled’ in powerful ways (McGinley, et al., 2017, p. 68).

Though emotional or empathic narrative engagements have become a subject of much interest, recent explorations have also given voice to the limitations (e.g., Keen, 2006; 2010), as well as the potential insights afforded by adopting creative narratives as vehicles for cultivating empathic imagination (e.g., Chabot-Davis, 2014; Edmundson, 2005; Jurecic, 2011). As best-selling novelist, essayist, and professor Leslie Jamison (2014) wrote in *The Empathy Exams*, empathic ways of knowing are not to be simplified or overlooked. They are complicated and labor intensive, often involving more than just remembering to say to another “that must really be difficult.” Empathy, she proposes, requires an awareness that no traumatic or troubling individual experience has clear or distinct boundaries. Enacting empathic imagination in ways that also acknowledge a sense of the intersected or woven quality of experience requires that people embrace, or even cultivate, a unique kind of self-permeability or porousness. As Jamison writes:

Trauma bleeds. Out of wounds and across boundaries. Sadness becomes a seizure. . . It [empathy] suggests you enter another person’s pain as you enter another person’s country, through immigration and customs, border crossing by way of query: What grows where you are? What are the laws? What animals graze there? (Jamison, 2014; p. 6)

In reading Jamison, I continued to wonder if stories are indeed capable of charting this sort of empathic/imaginative route or suggesting this kind of emotional itinerary. Do public school literature curricula or instructional standards, for example, take seriously the idea that stories might provide a network of possible pathways or imaginary maps suggesting how one might begin to take up “creative residence” in experiences other than one’s own? Considering the question of our embeddedness in the lives of one another, I wanted to believe that stories might serve as the basis for our connection to the world and people in the world. As Weinstein (2003) proposed, the arts and literature, when viewed in this way, enable a vitally important kind of imaginative and emergent “creative outreach” into other existences. As the theory goes, this sort of outreach is essential because it provides a vehicle through which readers might glimpse the network of communal relationships and experiences that comprise our world. Life is feeling, and feeling is “central currency of our lives,” writes Weinstein (2003, p. xxii). Feeling, he explains, is the mode of travel through which we begin to get a sense of the experiences of others. In this way, feeling reconceives art and literature as “profoundly democratic resources” that actually abide in each of us (p. xxv). The distinctive aspects of this art derive from a narrative’s commitment “to the separateness of persons and the irreducibility of quality to quantity, as well as its sense that what happens to individuals in the world has enormous importance” (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 32). Imagination and emotionality are central to the creative processes through which readers are tempted to try to imagine the life and times of people other than themselves, as well as their ability to perhaps see beyond the restrictive edges of the culturally customary or canonical to ways of seeing and thinking that were previously thought to be impossible or unimaginable (e.g., Bruner, 1986; Deveare-Smith, 1993; McGinley, et al., 2017).

As a university-based teacher educator, I continually sought to build instructional practices in my literature methods courses around these ideas. Though I felt an overwhelming devotion and allegiance to this work, like many of the teachers in whose classroom I conducted research, I eventually discovered that in embracing these affective commitments, I was increasingly teaching in “the corners” of my English methods classroom conceptually occupying the outer edges of the expected or “mainstream” instructional critical space. Still, as a researcher and teacher, I remained steadfastly drawn to the possibilities and necessity of affective engagement, emotional “outreach,” and “poetic seeing” that I believed stories invited. I took to heart the prospect that these ways of engaging were indispensable to trying to making sense of a range of intersecting cultural, racial, gendered, and economic pressures experienced across individuals occupying increasingly complex, diverse, and unjust social worlds. As I taught, I hoped that literary reading, in particular, would offer this kind of emotionally engaging space for students in my own courses. What’s more, it was becoming clear to me these affective commitments were especially fundamental and critical in social domains outside my literature classroom.

For example, such commitments are believed to be essential to creating productive anti-oppressive, race-related conversations because conversations of this kind often call for “affective

responses that make such learning emotional labor” (Grosland & Matias, 2017; p. 72). Grosland and Matias urge us to imagine “racial knowledge” as inseparable from emotionality. Not unlike the profound and unsteady feeling in our legs that hunger produces, we feel the “emotional burden” that accompanies anti-racist conversations. Since the effects of inflicted racism are fundamentally emotional, the bottom line for many white folks is that trying to acquire even a nascent sense of such racism requires imagination, emotional labor, empathic involvement. Though such labor need not only be brought to bear in the context of a literary experience, I am regularly reminded of the first time I read *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015), a book-length letter to his 15-year-old son in which he spoke of racism as a deeply-rooted primal reality capable of not only being witnessed but embodied, experienced, and felt. In the following passage, Coates honors the potencies of affect and feeling as fundamental to imagining and grasping this primal reality:

But all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body. (p. 10)

Reading this passage for the first time, I had a deep sense of emotional witnessing and of being summoned or dared to try to imagine the unimaginable pain and experience of another. What’s more, as years passed it was becoming ever more difficult for me to pretend that my social science lexicon or way of reasoning could somehow portray or begin to reveal this visceral reality when it simply was not capable of doing so.

4. Writing arts

Crisscrossing the creative forms of story, poetry, memoir, and essay, I trouble the possibility that literature (and the arts more broadly) reveals a reality in which human lives are far more networked and woven than we often presume to be the case (e.g., McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996; 2006; McGinley, et al., 2017; Haberl, 2019; Park, 2012; Weinstein, 2003). Additionally, I raise questions related to the value of affective approaches to literary reading and academic writing, as well as the meanings associated with engaging in a literary, drama-based experience with high school students.

In this “reality,” feelings and emotions serve as the connective tissue to the lives of other people. Art sets us on this course, and literature “takes this measure” writes Weinstein (2003, p. xxiii). In exploring this point of view, I continue to draw on the reasoning skills that have added to my storehouse of propositional knowledge as a way of zig-zagging and portraying the experience of engaging in literature or drama-based activities in school contexts. However, in unfolding this story of my academic writing experience and as a participant in a school-based dramatic arts project unfolds, I also invite readers into a slightly more performative or interpretative narrative space—one that prioritizes the experience of feeling as a way perceiving and comprehending; one that wanders from exclusively logical/rational renditions of this topic in order to make use of imaginative, emotional, and affective experiences and awarenesses, as well as intellectual ways of making meaning and responding to the larger world (Finley, 2005). Along the writing way, I raise several questions (and offer a few poems) that surface out of moments and experiences, but not in any need-to-be-answered, dissertation kind of way. In writing, I never saw it as my responsibility to discourage travel or close off any tempting pathways I may have helped to open or clear. I imagine my questions to be something more akin to trailheads with the potential to entice exploration on less-travelled routes above or below the literary tree line. In the same way that Julia Cameron (1998) describes the processes she associates with a writing life, I hoped to honor avenues for inquiring, uncertainty, or even “squinting,” as she wrote:

As a writer, I am always looking at things from a distance, always looking at something moving toward me from a long way off . . . I love staring off into the distance. I love squinting at images of things yet to come. I love watching them come into focus. (p. 28)

What’s more, and according to Ellie Haberl (2019), the prospect of abandoning the ideal of full focus may actually have unique “benefits.” Perhaps as she explains, we may be better served by “squinting,” leaving the image out-of-focus, embracing the inherent tensions in life that prevent it from ever coming clearly into view. More recently, in response to these perspectives on inquiry and writing, I

have engaged in a sort of “squinting” as a part of the process of deciding to follow the creative/affective loyalties and devotions of the undergraduate and MFA students enrolled in the creative non-fiction/memoir course I teach each year. Across semesters, I’ve noticed that many of these students are increasingly drawn to the life altering, life giving, and the deeply spiritual, cultural, and historical sensibilities they value in the writing of Gloria Anzaldua (1999; 2013). Advocating for changes in the social and cultural ways of locating women, as well as the treatment of people of Mexican origin in communities along the on the United States border, her work takes the form of poetry and stories from her life. Though I lack the art to fully interpret the written devotions of the students I teach, they seem at least momentarily (during our class) drawn to the deeply personal, cultural, and transformative sensibilities Anzaldua (1999) embraced as part of living a writing life. For these students and myself, Anzaldua’s contemplations on her own art-making practices readily portray writing as something deeply blended and woven across genres—a culturally soul-saving and self-creating process that is a vital and numinous resource on which to draw as a source of inspiration in one’s creative writing. Though the feelings that animate her writing are rarely explicitly named as such, affect often transcends clarity as her stories and arguments blend with each other across territories of feeling and reasoning. While my own experiences as an academic writer do not embody the connection to deep cultural and historical meanings that abide in Anzaldua’s writing, I was inspired to begin to try to “invoke art” in some nascent affective and emergent way. I hoped to produce writing that might allow me to become more “intimate with myself and others” while also exploring my commitments to the possibilities that creating emotional or empathic narrative texts might offer as embodied experiences (Anzaldua, 2013, p. 4).

More than once over the years, wavering in my energy for the kind of effort involved in continuing to exclusively create logical reliable arguments that embrace theory with supporting evidence and thoughtful analysis, I put the prospect of such academic writing projects aside and responded by re-dedicating myself to teaching the creative story writers and readers enrolled in the “Story and Memoir” course I taught. Though I continued my literacy-based work with teachers and community members, I also began the not-so-simple process of re-thinking how I might have “accompanied” the community members at the Neighborhood Ministries (an urban community center) where I conducted research or the ELA public school teachers and students I studied in classrooms in Michigan and Colorado.

Eventually I came across the work of Latino theologian Roberto Goizueta (1995) in an article by Enrique Sepulveda (2011) in which he described the pedagogy or consciousness of *acompañamiento* in connection to his work with transmigrant high school students reading non-canonical literature and writing autobiographical stories and poems about their experiences of being physical, social, and linguistic “outsiders.” For me, this was yet another experience of “staring off into the distance,” squinting at an out-of-focus image of a possible research/writing life while looking back at the ways of being and researching with others I had once professionally embraced. *Acompañamiento*, I realized, “includes not only ‘being’ with or feeling with another, but also ‘doing’ with another. . . . To accompany a person is to walk with them. It is above all, by walking with others that we relate to and love them. . . . (p. 206). What’s more, it reimagines the meaning of empathy, community, and selfhood so that “one’s full humanity, dignity, and common personhood are affirmed” (Sepulveda, 2011, p. 558).

Mid-afternoon. A voice wages through between songs in my headphones until the music fades. One question unearths another: Does literature portray the world as something more communally networked or less “private” than I had previously thought possible? What form(s) of writing or engaging with others might have required that I take seriously the commitments to knowing deeply or to the qualitative distinctions necessary for connecting myself to the people with whom I shared a classroom, a stage, or a sidewalk?

Revisiting my own professional writing-research story calls to mind a line from the song “Your Bright Baby Blues” by Jackson Browne (1976) in which he wrote, “I been up and down this highway/Far as my eyes can see/No matter how fast I run/I can never seem to get away from me.” If nothing else, revisiting the terrain of my professional writing life evokes a dreamlike return to the tiny bedroom in the house in Easton, Pennsylvania where I grew up. From the doorway of the room, I make an easy one-step transition into the vintage narrative arcade of my childhood experiences. Once inside, I choose from among several memorable plotlines worth re-entering, some more troubling than others, though

each one is deeply precious to me: “First Sadnesses,” “Pop’s Anger,” “First Holy Communion,” and “Nascent Electric Guitar Chords.” Not unlike some of the professional plotlines I created and embraced, as well as those I’d been cast into along the way, it has become increasingly clear that the decision to invest so much of my professional writing life in the logical/rationale form has also been deeply precious and transformative. In becoming someone who learned to rely almost exclusively on a gallery of reasoned arguments to substantiate ideas or beliefs, I devoted far less time to the affective dimension of my research life along with any attempt to “accompany” the lives of others with whom I so faithfully carried out my research. No doubt, the impact of the absence of this devotion has been profound.

On the other hand, artful narrative ways of writing and knowing would require that I become-storywriter, depending on stories and my less travelled storytelling abilities to “establish not truth but verisimilitude” (Bruner 1986, p. 11); to establish not analytical commentary but interpretation, dialogue, connection, and intimacy. Though I don’t forsake my well-feed paradigmatic predilections to use rigorous theory and reliable argument in this paper, I do try to also embrace the imagination and affective sensibilities of poets/novelists that are vital to creative narrative forms. These forms offer the possibility of compelling stories because they embrace complex and emotionally evocative portrayals of human experiences in disclosing the interior worlds of characters or “people” that comprise them (Finley, 2005; Haberl, 2019). I sought to write something that might begin to do “justice to our depths,” to borrow a phrase from Weinstein (2003). I wanted to do justice to my own depths and to the lived exigencies of the teacher and students I tried to accompany as I walked their school hallways, stood behind their crimson stage curtains, and coached them through rehearsals and performances. This, I soon learned, would require that I give up on always trying to use my inquiry-based writing as a medium through which I could effusively analyze, explicate, or methodically pretend to “know everything.” Call this, *The Story of the Crimson Stage Curtains*.

I hoped to use the blended memoir/essay of a performing arts experience with young people as a way to explore an alternative to the modes of communicating and inquiring into which I had been professionally cast. I believed, like many others (e.g., Behar, 1996; Coles, 1989; Haberl, 2019; Seigworth & Gregg, 2010; Weinstein, 2003) that narrative (or even poetic) sensibilities deserve our attention because they offer a profoundly affective portrayal of our circumstances, our resources, and our interconnectedness to others. To paraphrase Weinstein (2003), is it possible, that our sense of self and our emotions neither begin nor end where we think they do? Are stories and art prodigious democratic resources, potentially offering us ways of seeing and hearing others that broaden our territories and redraw our emotional borders and maps? As he elaborated,

Our gut feeling that we are real, while others are ghosts—a gut feeling rarely acknowledged, may be egregiously wrong. . . . our belief that our own hurt is private . . . that conviction is challenged by art. Reality, art suggests, may actually be communal, networked. (p. 71)

Weinstein’s words call to mind the widely published poem by Stanley Kunitz (1978) called “The Layers.” The poem seems to invite readers to imagine a portrayal of human life that is often less acknowledged—one that is perhaps more communal and networked than the portrayal of individuated selves we take to be real. Kuntz’s poem further reveals what Weinstein (2003; p. 32) describes as the “echoing, choral dimension of [his] life,” one of shared experiences, familial bonds, and connections to others through which Kuntz has experienced the world. Though the possibilities are certainly broad, the poem imagines the scattering and loss of loved ones, the struggle to reconcile such losses, and the treasured quality of human relationships. Quite possibly, it summons readers to consider how porous and intermingled one’s presumed solo storyline might be.

In reading Kuntz’s poem, I feel my movement into other lands and other persons along with the sense of freedom and privilege with which I live and experience life. I feel the many lives I have seamlessly “walked through” as a teacher and father. I ponder the loved ones into whose lives I have fused and embedded my own. I feel the losses of my “scattered” friends and kinfolk, and I overhear the choral voices rising from so many “abandoned camp-sites” recalling the all-night summer jam sessions that gave my young Pennsylvania friends and I some simple wood and amplified wire on which to sound out adolescent dreams of restoration and communion. Is this art, imaginatively moving us into

other selves and locations, inviting and inspiring us to redraw the map between self and other while bearing witness to our depths?

5. Stories and “Doing justice to our depths”

When we deal in stories, we deal in the art of the possible and “the sense of the alternativeness of human possibility” in cultural life, says Jerome Bruner (2002, p. 53) in his book *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*. The applicable “skills” that stories teach, reside in our awareness of how they can be used to imagine new ways conceiving ourselves and living with others. But, dealing in stories also involves being tossed, intentionally or not, into ruthless, repressive, or exploitive storylines that one must hope to be able to navigate over a lifetime, perhaps through a demanding and critically transformative re-storying process aimed at completely re-mapping or re-conceiving troublesome or extremely painful and traumatic experiences (e.g., Appleman, 2009; Frank, 2010; Kingston, 1975/1989; Soter, 1999; Thomas, 2018).

In trying to embrace these arts-related possibilities, I don’t wish to diminish the reality that reading stories can tempt readers into tragically coarse and degrading sentiments that involve the conscious or otherwise deliberate dehumanization of people (e.g. Appleman, 2009; Chabot-Davis, 2014; Morrison, 1992; Soter, 1999; Thomas, 2018). Still, I consider the commitments to feeling and creative outreach, to qualitative distinctions, and to “poetic” ways of seeing as necessary for connecting individuals (and readers) to the worlds of others, as well as to the possibilities of cooperatively resisting and re-creating shared visions of cultural, educational, and community life (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1999; 2013; McGinley, et al., 2017; Green, 1995; Morrison, 1992; Nussbaum, 1995; Deveare-Smith, 1993; Sanchez, 1986; 1995; Thomas, 2018; Weinstein, 2003). What’s more, these commitments to affective knowing and to the interiors of others require more than the apparent “true-to-life” portrayal that strictly paradigmatic modes of thinking are often understood to produce. Alternatively, I believe they require that we begin to prioritize feeling as an equally powerful way of knowing, in much the way that Tim O’Brien (1990) describes stories as distinctive in their invitation to consider what feels true (i.e., “story truth”).

Does the affective realm help us to communicate the incommunicable or perhaps feel that which is very simply, “beyond words?” Do Stories and poems do justice to our depths, justice to the distances and the networks between us, justice to our tectonic and visceral interiors? Perhaps these are the interiors that Langston Hughes (1951/1959) explored in his widely read poem “A Dream Deferred,” a poem in which he urgently and repeatedly provokes us with experiences that require emotional movement from self to another as a part of beginning to identify and face up to the sources and visceral nature of racial pain and questions such as How does racial pain reveal itself? Where does anguish, suffering, and pain go?

For me, the poem offers a provocation to “re-locate,” to engage in “movement” as a part of confronting myself and the experiences of other individuals. This kind of motion is also expressed and encouraged in the dramatic performances of African American playwright Anna Deveare Smith, and not unlike the “vision of feeling-as-connective-tissue” also put forth by Weinstein (2003). In the introduction to her play, *Fires in the Mirror*, Deveare-Smith (1993) describes the empathic possibilities she imagines when using performance art to “interest people around us in motion, in moving from one side to the other, in experiencing one hand and the other hand, and to building bridges between places” (p. xxxix). For Smith, encouraging audiences “to reach for the other” while also being aware of the distance between themselves and others, does not necessarily invite the clichéd “feel-good” kind of empathic experience about which Chabot-Davis (2014) and Keen (2010) caution readers. As Smith describes the possibilities she imagines for her own dramatic art, reaching for the other through encounters with narratives, may also involve difficult self-encounter as audience members are encouraged to engage in the work of trying to connect to and feel the experiences of others as “their own” in some partial or emergent way.

In the same way that feelings of fear, anger, and pain sometimes accompany the jolt of self-disclosure provoked by imaginative encounters with other people, “A Dream Deferred” has always compelled me to try to feel the incommunicable, unshareable, or unbearable. I wonder if it possible that the poem resonates with me because the feelings that Hughes invites readers to experience are actually “taking place” inside each of us, crossing the space between lives? In reading “A Dream

Deferred,” do feelings of lost hope, abandoned promise, unspeakable pain and despair become public and shared, offering us emergent access to presences or interiors that are not “our own?” Perhaps this an example of the poetic arts as unveiling, as threshold, as an opening to something unforeseen that might unexpectedly tempt us out of ourselves into new landscapes and connections with those around us.

I remember hiking one July morning through scattered 8 am ancestral pueblos in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico. High desert sun-scorched sand with petroglyphs rocks like the personal history carved into the cave of my own mouth. Looking down, stepping watchfully, I notice the recklessly excavated edge of what I imagine to be a painted ceramic piece, broken with rough edges, the fragment of a barely legible story in the soft sand beneath my feet.

Is this the style of unexpected self-confrontation with the “seismic emotional and psychic reality underneath” all of us that the arts promise to deliver (Weinstein, 2003; p. xxiii)? Is this the barely visible primal traffic that is hard to describe, but accessible in the way Hughes’ poem makes more tangible the unimaginable distress of struggling to make sense of raw realities and agonizing emotions that abide from incommunicable trauma, racism, and shattered aspirations? As Coates (2015) noted earlier in a letter to his son, this is the kind of primordial commerce that “lands with great violence, upon the body” (p.10). Perhaps Hughes’ poem recreates these realities in an emotional way, as “homegrown” or available to be experienced as “our own,” as communal, as something shared and less individuated. Do our feelings fasten themselves as essential to this kind of travel, this kind of artful “reading” and affective exploration?

Stories and poems stockpile news about bonds and feelings
revealing new portrayals of self and others.

Re-sketching, distances, definitions, boundaries, and locations between selves.

Opening corridors of human emotions exploding long held notions
of self-enclosure and seclusion.

6. Inspiration for a Choreopoem: Rebel Voices and Cosmic Volume

Enticed by the creative gates that the persuasive voices of so many adolescent school readers/writers, with whom I had worked, eventually forced open inside of me, the experience of composing and choreographing a poem emerged as a precious art-based experience. It was a creative project that made space for feeling (Palmer, 1983), space for the freedom needed to encounter and navigate presences/lives outside of myself. In light of this, I tried to shape the remaining pages of this paper into an artful and affective narrative account that included the story of authoring a poem with young people along with a memoir of the events that both surrounded and inspired the writing and eventual public performance of the poem. Both activities were a collaborative effort involving a small group of students and their drama teacher (Luis) aimed at publicly commemorating the life of MLK, Jr. and the larger struggle for freedom and racial justice in America.

As I imagined this performance-based project with students and Luis, I couldn’t keep my thoughts from so many of the perspectives about emotion and the literary arts that I discussed above. I also couldn’t turn down the cosmic volume on the rebel voices of so many young story readers and writers with whom I had talked and worked in schools over the last 20 years: I re-read and replayed the stories/interviews I collected from these students in response to a range of classroom and community-based reading and storytelling experiences in which I played a part as both researcher and teacher. Across a range of different conversations, I listened for the collective echoing, the woven fabric of life experiences, and the emotions embodied in young students’ responses to my interview questions about the stories they read, wrote, and heard from others:

I think she [my ELA teacher] was trying to, like, make you go deep into your heart for you to pull out things that could be affecting someone’s life. . . . (Mari)

I think that empathy is what really combines us. It’s our mold and imagination . . . cause if we didn’t have imagination, we would all be the same. There wouldn’t be [a need for] empathy to feel for each other. Because we’re all [we’d all be] the same [and we’re not]. That person’s feeling like I am. So, we’d just be in ourselves [without empathy]. (Allie)

[When we talk in class about the people in *To Kill a Mockingbird*] it just makes . . . it's easier for you to understand what someone else's going through. So, like, for me, I'm really passionate about trying to stop women's stereotypes . . . and like reading the "Declaration of Sentiments" I could really connect with the women and girls who went through that, like, they couldn't even . . . some of them can't show their face, can't go out in public without permission from their husbands . . . and what that feels like. (Alexa)

[When people on the street stopped to tell us a story], the story is no longer theirs but ours too. We feel their pain, happiness, and laughter. (Henry)

I think it was really cool to ask people [on the street] about their stories . . . And I think you can kind of get a different point of view on your own stories from theirs. Maybe they're similar or different. Maybe they're connected in a way. (Cole)

[When we traveled as a class to the site of the Sand Creek Massacre], I let myself be there for a moment and not let myself just write everything down that I was feeling. Because of this, I will always remember that you can learn by just feeling. (Terrance)

Sitting there on the bench [that overlooks the site of the Sand Creek Massacre in Colorado] thinking about this event. . . I am going to take away [take in] the sorrow and sadness. And I want to take away how it felt to actually stand at the site and feel the hopelessness, like I could do nothing to help. (Emily)

I tell my teacher and my mother and my father that when I grow up I want to be a Black poetess or a story writer or a writer. . . . When I wrote it [my poem about Harriet Tubman] I felt like I was right there, when she was freeing her people, and I was one of the people she freed, and I was thanking her so much. (Tanya)

At home, revisiting these interviews and stories, I let the voices of these students roam through me. The classroom world spins and resonates again. A stadium of hallway mayhem. Night falls. I continue listening to the words of daring young sojourners who, with the help of their teachers, tiptoed into the villages of strangers in search of stories, lives, and feelings.

Stories get at life because stories get at feeling
 crawling inside to crack open monuments of self, silence, and history
 making pain and joy travel among us
 resurrecting lives, loved ones, families, and existences
 unfolding lost maps, gathering missing pages
 treasuring us into our collective stories
 and unlocking narrative cages.

7. Writing and choreographing a Poem

In beginning the choreopoem performance project, Luis and I worked with four students from his classroom to create a first draft of a "many-voiced" poem—a creative work "assembled" from the poetry of several published authors (McGinley & Kamberelis, 2018). We titled the poem "Legends and Love." Robert, Keshia, CJ, and Krista were the Latino and African American student performers with whom Luis and I collaborated in altering lines, negotiating spoken parts, interpreting/revising meanings, as well as choreographing specific performance roles. All four students had previous drama experience in at least one of Luis' school-based theater productions. The actual script of the choreopoem appears in the pages below.

Sitting on my kitchen floor with a pair of scissors and a black marker, I initially cut, pasted, wrote, and collaged words, lines, verses, and larger sections of original poems and text borrowed from the scattered photocopied pages of poetry written by Maya Angelou (1994), Haki Madhubuti (2004), Sonia Sanchez (1986; 1995), the written speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963; 2010), and the lyrics of hip hop artist Brother Ali (2003). On that day, my kitchen was the scene of a kind of creative crime. In creating this rough sketch, I hoped to inspire a group of four high school drama students to join me as co-authors. In subsequent weeks, we eventually worked as a loosely organized team of writers, keeping account of the original authors/poets of specific lines. I brushed off all possible thoughts of theft to what I reasoned was a meaningful artistic and collaborative educational project.

As the work continued at home and at Norwood High School, I communicated with the students as poems and poetic lines were selected from different works and combined into a single collaged-inspired work of poetry that was intended to imagine and preserve the commitments to liberation, justice, racial equality, community, self-determination, self-love, and hope that were embraced by the poets in their original works. Whenever possible, students, Luis, and I made every effort to preserve the line formatting and artistic choices of the original works. However, in many cases, specific line lengths and poetic arrangements were adapted and merged to represent the particular speech preferences of the high school-aged performers who continued imagining and revising the work of these poets and authors during initial live rehearsals with Luis and I (as described below). In other cases, the wording of particular poetic lines was revised to express subtle changes in content or rhythm that students or Luis wished to express. Although the words of these freedom-inspired poets and writers served as the initial creative and intellectual inspiration and foundation for this work, the scissored words and fragments of text continued to come to life in the thoughtfully and emotionally choreographed bodies and voices of the students. Over the course of a few weeks, we managed to create a working “spoken” draft of a many-voiced poem that we hoped would respect the original works and their affirmation of Black art and Black liberation politics as a means to awaken consciousness and achieve autonomy, social justice, and independence. We also hoped that the poem would be worthy of reading and performing before the adults and school-aged students that would be attending the public commemoration of the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the Fairmount Theater in the city.

Throughout the directing and choreographing process, Luis was an inspiration: thoughtful, quiet, reflective, knowledgeable. An unfamiliar blast of history, experience, and personhood slowly appearing in the caffeinated light of Café Zuri on 32nd Avenue in downtown where we first met. A dozen or so of his words about his students and our potential collaboration topple through me. He was a teacher and director of the theater program in the urban high school that students attended, a position he initially took with the idea that “it would be temporary.” That all changed when he directed his students in the play “Zoot Suit,” the first ever high school production to be staged at the Bell Theater in the city. Later that year, Luis and 15 student actors (mostly of Mexican origin) from Norwood High School were invited to the largest arts gathering in the world, the International Fringe Festival in Edinburgh, Scotland where they performed “Simply Maria” written by Los Angeles-based author, Josefina Lopez. It was the only play at the festival written by a Latina. An MFA graduate of the University of California-Los Angeles, Luis’s commitment to the Latino community and the issues facing the Mexican American immigrant community in the city was a major focus of his dramatic work with school students in the surrounding metropolitan area.

As performance rehearsals of the choreopoem continued, Luis stood downstage center in an empty after-school auditorium. Together with Robert, Keshia, CJ, and Krista, the “original” poem was shaped into a spoken-performance form. Written words became living adolescent voices. Specific poetic parts were assigned to individual students and chorally performed lines were identified and assigned by Luis. Students were expected to memorize specific poetic parts and their progress toward this goal was assessed during bi-weekly rehearsals. What began as a pretty straightforward poem constructed from other poems on the floor of my kitchen, became a collaborative and improvised project involving the creative contributions of Luis, the four students, myself, the poets, and the words of MLK and Brother Ali. In all, we engaged in this creative process for approximately eight weeks.

Still, just how collaborative and liberating this rehearsal experience became was another matter entirely. Not to be overlooked or taken for granted, there was often a fascinating synergy between us all, productive and engaged rehearsals with everyone on stage and moments of profound and focused commitment to a shared project that justified our collective presence and liberatory message. Still, locating and thoughtfully sustaining this collaborative dramatic and creative space was often an emotionally strenuous and hard-fought experience for students, Luis, and myself. Scheduling sky and wind and sun. Missed rehearsals and forgotten lines. Torn jeans, Thrift Store t-shirts, and rain falling lightly on the Sharistan gas station, Faceta’s Beauty Salon, and a Chinese restaurant called Ho Wei that advertised \$1.39 scoops of ice cream in the neighborhood. Backstage near a school piano, CJ’s right hand gently embracing the territory over his heart as he spoke: “We don’t really have ownership, we

don't own our lives . . . our friend's [lives] . . . It's not easy like it's getting me stuck in some like . . . I feel like I'm trapped" (Fieldnotes).

The next morning, outside on brick and concrete sidewalks before school, young friends and lovers dance slowly, forming lazy patterns, weaving filaments between souls. Arms and legs entangled in unrehearsed choreographies. Beneath concrete arches, several large front doors push open in black metal synchronicity. Security guards arrive. Conversations break apart. Words whisper north, catching a ride on multi-colored hot air balloons that scatter adolescent life stories like tiny papier-mâché piñatas opening up above historic Highlands rooftops and urban streets:

Um I mean, I don't know, I feel like I've been depressed lately, too, because of how everything is going on. I mean my brother wants to sneak out but he can't cuz he's on full watch and I don't know he's been pretty tough with my other brother William . . . so I mean it's putting me down . . . like giving me a hard time to likely concentrate in school. (Melody)

[It's hard to talk about] because like even when I talk to certain people they make me feel like I'm a bad person and so like I just like think about some things that I've done like if I talk to people I want to have a filter in case I say something that would offend them and then make me feel even worse about myself so I just . . . it's a crazy rollercoaster. (Chelsea)

So, like I've been like for me school's not really the best place for me but I still, I still go to school cuz most of my life all years of my school has been constant pressure, constant being annoyed, constant stressed out, and constantly switched from one school to another and also constantly having new bullies on my back. I've been bullied for as long as I can remember and at . . . in elementary there was this girl that was . . . she hated me and I never did anythin' wrong to her and she . . . umm, we'll call her Mary. Mary decided that she . . . she just wanted to make my life a living hell and that affected home, home crying . . . came crying home every day. Every day after school crying, crying, crying. (Lucinda)

Like it really hurts because like my mom she's my hero, like that's like my best friend right there. And it sucks because like you can see something that's just like a substance tear like someone apart and it's not only just like it tears just that person apart, but it tears like the people closest to them. And addiction sucks, but she's good now so we're all good. That's all [no more talking], because I don't want to like get into it a lot. (Valerie)

To be accountable for so many things substantial and insignificant, every word spoken, every line written, each step taken on every trail, each person, every gesture journeying from one body to another, every young life on its voyage. Like their young peers above, Robert, Kesha, CJ, and Krista also “carried the sky” much like Tim O’Brien’s soldiers. The words of powerful poets—Angelou, Madhubuti, Sanchez, MLK, and Ali, they carried them as well. They carried the histories of hope and struggle, the fires of sit-ins and marches, of jazz and hip hop. Outside of the rehearsed drama that Luis and I orchestrated for the stage, students also carried their own lives—experiences about which Robert and Kesha were the most forthcoming when we found a few rare moments between rehearsals and the time crunch, to talk to one another.

5.1 Robert. A young Latino student, Robert wanted to “march for the dreamers” and “to matter and like and be a part of history,” he once told Luis and me. When I met Robert, he was a sophomore, a tap-dancer, and a self-taught jazz piano player, who had developed a passion for the performing arts, as well as a passion for stealing. “Playing piano has always been easy for me,” he explained one day after a rehearsal sitting backstage in an oversized white t-shirt in front of a well-played and heavily varnished baby grand school piano where he had just played “some parts of a tune by CJ Crawford” (well-known jazz pianist). I can’t recall asking him how he learned to play. I remember the whole raining-apples moment didn’t last more than 10 minutes, including the story he told me about how he began playing piano, and that I recorded in my fieldnotes:

My dad had one of those like old, like toy plastic piano’s you know like the kind they make with about 25 plastic keys (Robert describes the size of the keyboard gesturing with his hands) that you hold like on your legs when you sit. And I just started playing it and like figuring things out in the house and it just came to me like that.

Talk was rare. Connecting was difficult across the distance. I probably should have inquired more, asked additional questions of Robert. But I mostly listened. I thought he might think I was questioning or doubting his story, and so the conversation ended. It was the first time we really tried to

share anything with each other until, sometime later, the day we walked through the school lunchroom together and the topic of stealing came up. But, I never mentioned the piano playing again and neither did Robert. We saw each other at rehearsals and on the day of the performance. That was it.

Since the performance, I heard that “Robert had been in and out of trouble,” according to his mom who confided to Luis that she was “having a hard time with him.” I still had not forgotten the day backstage. The CJ Crawford jazz tune. The toy plastic piano, tap dancing, and the lines from the MLK performance. I remembered there were other things challenging my narrative of Robert. Flashback to the lunchroom story in which he quietly confessed to me as we walked between the tables and the stadium-size voices, “I don’t know, I just see somethin, and I wanna take it. I wanna own it. Like that cell phone right there on the table.”

I stood riveted, peering out from behind crimson stage curtains of the Fairmount. Robert stepped forward into the stage lights: tap shoes, long baggy t-shirt, hands reaching out toward the theater audience of children, adolescents, and adults in a gift-giving gesture. Silence. And he began passionately with some words from the poem “Catch the Fire” by African American poet Sonia Sanchez (1995, p. 15):

Where is our beautiful fire that gave light to the world? The fire of pyramids;
The fire that burned through the holes of slave ships and made us breathe;
The fire that made guts into chitterlings;
The fire that took rhythms and made jazz (Robert tap dances rhythms and then jazz).

5.2 Kesha. Kesha was an African American student in her final year of high school. We met at the after-school Spoken Word program that I organized in Luis’s classroom during the spring semester. As a high school senior, she described herself as “a poet and a singer.” She saw the flyer we circulated around the hallways inviting students to attend weekly “poetry” sessions if they were interested in writing or performing poetry, songs, spoken word, rap, or hip hop. It was orange with red and purple swirling lines and dots filling the spaces around the phrase “Poetry Can Be Flowetry” painted in large black letters in the center. Attendance was irregular. A small group of students eventually came to Luis’ drama room each week. With some students, we converted a crowded wardrobe closet in the back of the classroom into a small recording studio. Miguel, a young custodian at the school, showed up after school one day offering to help us with any of our sound or recording-related needs. We stood facing each other in the doorway. Nike to Nike. Something slept inside him, some devotion or loyalty he was just beginning to recognize and explore. One day, unloading recording equipment from my car in the parking lot behind the school, he looked at my face, and we both stopped for a moment as I noted in my fieldnotes:

I started helping my cousins do the sound and the music for block parties around in the neighborhoods and community . . . and that’s how I got started. The community college, they have a music production program if I can find the time . . . that’s the plan.

We nodded in solidarity, and I reached for the small Fender Blues Junior amp behind the passenger seat. No words. The room took shape. White cinder block walls with random pieces blue foam sound-proofing. Then two mics, a nice keyboard, a laptop with recording software, and the Blues Junior. Miguel synced the recording equipment and kept me posted on the need for additional equipment. Students wrote and recorded. Call this The Story of the Crowded Wardrobe Closet.

One Monday, Kesha showed up with “a poem” on a piece of paper torn from a spiral bound notebook with the words “Dear Society” printed in ink across the top. She handed me the poem. “Here’s a poem I wrote.” Two verses with frayed edges. Crumpled words. An emotional travel itinerary. One large block of handwritten text from margin to margin, top to bottom. No line breaks. She spoke the verses and sang the chorus: “Dear Society, Dear Society, Dear Society, Dear Society. This is my letter to ya’ll. My letter to ya’ll.” She could sing. I helped with some punctuation.

Dear Society you think I’m thin because I don’t eat, but did you ever stop to think it’s cause I’m quick on my feet? The label you put on me you know I’m peelin’ it off.

Dear society you make me sick but I’m fightin the cough. I’m fightin’ the lies, the stereotypes that say I’m less than I am when instructed to walk I gave it more and I ran. I see girls burnin’ they skin because they think they ain’t tan and you say boys that play with dolls make em’ less than a man.

This is my letter to ya'll sayin' that I'm sick of ya'll ok'n all the women you portrayin' and doin' nothin' but displayin' they bodies like it's a play thing. And young girls see this and they wanna do the same thing. Then they ain't lookin' for nothin' but boys with the bling bling. And all they wanna be is what they see on T.V. Unless they got a role model in they lives tellin' em' otherwise. That what they think they really love is somethin' they should despise cause women ain't just ass and hips and thighs and tits. They need to know that women got a mind. But in today's society it's kinda hard for me to find so Dear Society I been workin' so hard on the double but you is puttin' me through so much drama, lies and trouble, oh. (Unpublished poem)

Kesha's devotion and belief in the performance arts, her music, and her poetry of social critique was clear. The two verses of her poem issue a challenging provocation, an emotional and defiant correction of prevailing cultural narratives and the "labels" that function to diminish her personhood followed by a emotional critique of the persistently perilous and flawed storylines that "say I'm less than I am." Her artful words offer an entry into a visceral drama, an invitation into another existence, a chance to move from one to the other, to "creatively" walk with another in an act of *acompañamiento*—to experience a sense of being, feeling, or doing with another.

Months after the performance, Kesha graduated and enrolled in a local community college. I reached out several times. Eventually, I found some web pages, Instagram, Facebook. She was writing, singing, and performing. I ran across her music and spoken word on Reverb Nation, Sound Cloud, and YouTube. A photo of Kesha in a hip hop knit beanie with the local area code printed backwards on the front. She described herself as "a singer, song writer, pianist, and artist specializing in Spoken Word, Hip Hop, Jazz, and Blues."

8. Performing "Legends and Love"

After several weeks of planned and impromptu rehearsals, revised and re-arranged lines, polished and spontaneous spoken parts, improvised and scripted dance moves designed to animate the words of the authors whose poetry the students performed, the assembled work became a full-blown choreographed poem—a "choreopoem," as Luis referred to it. In the end, we had created "Legends and Love," three words taken from an essay written by Sonia Sanchez (1986, p. 7).

Inside the Fairmount on a cold sunny day in March, Robert, Kesha, CJ, and Krista sang, danced, rapped, spoke, loved, hoped, and performed "Legends and Love" before a couple of thousand fellow students, teachers, and other adults in commemorating the legacy of Dr. King. I listened to the performance from backstage where moments earlier Luis, the students and I hurriedly improvised last-minute line revisions, fine-tuned emotions and passions, tweaked choreography, and checked the temperamental remote mics. I stood beside Luis, both of us watching safely from the edges of the map as the MC began her introduction:

"So, without further ado, please welcome from Norwood High School the Northside Theater Company as they perform "Legends and Love," a compilation of words and poetry by Sonia Sanchez, Haki Madhubuti, Maya Angelou, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Brother Ali."

Deliberately, yet almost timidly, Robert, Kesha, CJ, and Krista occupied their places across the stage like original land owners returning to re-claim rightful territories. Applause. Downtown. The Fairmount at noon. Microphones crackled. MLK. Montgomery, AL.

(Across the stage facing forward in the following order: Robert, Kesha, CJ, and Krista)

CJ: (Confident and challenging) And you. My sisters and brothers. This audience of citizens and students who are here to hear.

All: (Individually) Live . . . Live . . . Live.

All: (In Chorus) Live.

Krista: (Confident and challenging.) Are you hearing me?

Where is your fire?

You got to find it and pass it on

From you to me.

Robert: From me to her and from her to him.

CJ: From the son to the father from the brother to the sister.

Kesha: From the daughter to the mother from the mother to the child.

CJ: (Challenging) Where is your fire? I say where's your fire?

Can't you smell it coming out of your past?

The fire of living . . . Not dying.

The fire of loving . . . Not killing.

The fire of Blackness . . . Not gangster shadows.

Robert: Where is our beautiful fire that gave light to the world?

The fire of pyramids;

The fire that burned through the holes of slave ships and made US breathe;

The fire that made guts into chitterlings;

The fire that took rhythms and made jazz; (Robert Tap dances then waits for applause.)

Krista: (Plays air trumpet for Robert.) The fire of sit-ins and marches that made us jump boundaries and leap barriers;

The fire that took street talk and sounds and made righteous imhotep raps.

CJ: Where is your fire, the torch of life full of Nzingha and Nat Turner and Garvey and DuBois and Fannie Low Hamer and Martin and Malcolm and Mandela. (Right fists in the air—one beat)

Robert: Hey brother.

CJ: (Correcting) Brotha.

Krista: Hey sister.

Kesha: (Correcting) Sistah. Here is my hand. Catch the fire and live, live. (Whispering)

All: (Individually) Live . . . Live . . . Live.

All: (In Chorus) Live.

CJ: (A wake up) We need not whisper this to neighbors or friends.

We need not kneel or hide our emotions at this hour.

We need not fail to call up the history of Black flight
caught between success, BET and the color of gold and coal.

All: Take time out.

Robert: We cannot walk alone. We have new definitions.

We are the offspring of Chaka Zulu, Nat Turner, Ida B. Wells, and Duke Ellington.

CJ: Was it Duke Ellington

who said that music was his mistress?

boy, she musta been fine

wore red, read poetry and prose could swing naturally,

danced a lot and didn't need too much sleep, um, um

(Kesha and Krista swing and dance as CJ speaks.)

All: Take time out.

Kesha: We cannot walk alone. We have new definitions.

We are the offspring of Paul Robeson, Rosa Parks, and Malcolm X.

Krista: (Rising up and inspired) Make it plain brother Malcolm

sweet singer of tongues that loosen the scalp,

show me how to be a revolutionary

overnight wrap me in your red orange rage till I ripen in your black field.

Oh masculine man of words, your words run down and no one can wind you up.

All: Take time out.

Robert: We cannot walk alone. We have new definitions.

We are the offspring of Ella Baker, Harold Washington, and Martin Luther King.

Kesha: (Follow Robert immediately.) And I called out to Martin's dream to penetrate our bodies, to make us lean with legends and love. I called out to the dreamers to dedicate themselves to a new day, to discipline their lives so the next generation could truly BE.

CJ: (Like an MLK speech) For I know as Martin knew: The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa/ Nairobi, Kenya/ Accra, Ghana/ New York City/ Atlanta, Georgia/ Denver, Colorado/ or Memphis, Tennessee, the cry is always the same, 'the human soul yearns to be free.

All: Take time out.

Krista: We cannot walk alone. We have new definitions. We are the offspring of Gwendolyn Brooks, Sonia Sanchez, Haki Madhubuti, and Gospel and Blues.

Robert:(Follow Krista immediately) Oh, that boy Wynton musta been listenin' to Pops he plays trumpet real good just like Satchmo when he hot, my grandfather announced and I agreed more and more. The trumpet seems like it is sewn to his lips 'cause he plays like Sterling Brown reading his poems. And we all know poetry comes from God. (Kesha, Krista, CJ play air trumpet.)

All: Take time out. We cannot walk alone. We have new definitions and new lyrical expressions.

Kesha: (Singing) My country tis of thee, sweet land of

All: (Spoken) Liberty.

Kesha: Wait for me, watch for me. My spirit is the surge of open seas.

CJ: Look for me, ask for me, I'm the rustle in the autumn leaves.

Krista: When the sun rises

Robert: I am the time.

Krista: When the children sing

Robert:I am the rhyme.

CJ: (Robert beatboxing/CJ raps.) Leave it to me to create hope where there was none. The human being shall cast shadows on the sun. Leave it to me to create hope where there was none. My inner soul shall cast shadows on the sun. [Repeat Stanza above]

Krista: (Robert silent. Krista raps.) I empty everything in the bank to give for it. I empty all the days of my life to live for it. I empty all the blood in my veins to fight for it. I empty all the ink in this pen to write for it. (Pause for silence)

Kesha: And when great souls die, our senses, restored, never to be the same, whisper to us. (Pause and everyone walks to center stage and holds hands.)

Krista: They existed. CJ: They existed.

All: We can be. Be and be better. For they existed. (Full bow)

9. Applause and evanescence

They existed. The Little Rock Nine. Woolworth's Lunch Counter. Selma to Montgomery. Nat Turner, Ida B. Wells, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, James Baldwin, and Malcolm. Voices that tore a passionate and revolutionary path into the sky above the 1950's and 1960's. Exiting the 88-year-old theater, students, Luis, and I walked through luxuries reminiscent of the golden age of film. "An ornamented lobby, a vaulted sunburst ceiling, cut glass chandeliers, Egyptian lights, Italian marble, and a neon marquee. Aztec figures, fern, floral, leaf motifs, sun rays, and the Ziggurat form" (Fairmount Theater, 2018). Zig Zag Art Deco theater doors swung away from their frames, and several hundred squinted as they adventured back into the late winter sun, arms and legs optimistically entangled in accidental solidarity. They scanned the landscape. Streets, concrete, and maroon awnings. The homeless shuffled quietly past on an ancient, unmarked trail. We heard the wind circling in the tall glass above. We heard our own voices and the voices of others. We heard the hushed rows of empty theater seats we left behind like red velour monuments calling us to remember service, struggle, courage, and sacrifice. Along the golden, cosmic horizon of the Fairmount Theater, multiple unnoticed fires seemed to still be rising. Fires of living and loving. "Fires that took rhythms and made jazz. Fires that took street talk and sounds and made righteous imhotep raps" (Sanchez, 1995; p. 15).

Robert, Kesha, CJ, Krista, and I hiked a few blocks of sidewalk in downtown before piling into my Honda van. The afternoon air smelled like waffles, auto exhaust, and fresh asphalt. Outside the car, I fished for the keys and stared into the red brick and mortar wall adjacent to the parking lot, one side of an urban box with the blue sky folded over above our heads. I focused and assessed, stared trance-like straight ahead, hoping a purpose would reveal itself. Threads of sunlight. Hands of wind. Sounds of

sky. A passage from “Sonny’s Blues” that I often recited to myself, returned to me. I stared at the brick wall and read silently from the red and gray masonry:

I saw my mother's face again, and felt, for the first time, how the stones on the road she had walked must have bruised her feet. I saw the moonlit road where my father's brother died. . . . I saw my little girl again and felt Isabel's tears again, and I felt my own tears begin to rise. And I was yet aware that this was only a moment, that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky. (Baldwin, 1957/1998; p. 32)

At home later that day, it was nearly dark when I carelessly opened *A Scream Goes Through the House: Art, feelings, self-encounter, connective tissue, woven lives*. Four young voices from the afternoon performance keep tumbling through me: “Where is your fire, the torch of life/full of Nzingha and Nat Turner and Garvey/and DuBois and Fannie Low Hamer and/Martin and Malcolm and Mandela” (Sanchez, 1995, p. 15). Like crackling radio voices tentatively emerging out of the vintage social science static, certain questions kept returning to me: How do the narrative arts inform us? Is literature, and the human feelings it evokes, ultimately a mode of travel and transformation? Do human emotions act as a kind of connective tissue linking us to other people? Although I have revisited these and other related questions many times in this paper, I’ve always thought of them like longstanding hotel reservations or map locations I could remember in a someday-maybe-travelling kind of way rather than something that required a specific confirmation or answer. As questions, they represented real destinations/locations without any plan for how, when, or if ever, I might arrive.

10. Epilogue and final thoughts

As the narrative of my experience as an academic writer unfolded along with the exploration of literary reading, and the work of “Legends and Love,” it was plain that I was learning what it meant to be part of a story from which I could not erase myself. It was plain that I was learning how to listen for dreams and disappointments, fears and possibilities, tensions and revelations, as well as how to reveal them in artful and emotional ways. It was plain that “telling my own story alongside and entangled within the telling of others’ stories . . . depend[ed] upon the theater of my imagination for life” (Tedlock, 2018, p. 863). It was plain that I was encountering and learning to witness what participation in a literary, drama-based event might and might not make possible for myself, four students, and their teacher. I offer the following brief story of my work with Luis and his students as a way of continuing to value a sense of emergence while choosing to invite readers to make meaning from the emotive and affective aspects of this text. I encourage readers to embrace a slightly more performative, aesthetic, or interpretative narrative space designed to invite your performance of meanings, tensions, complexities, revelations, reverberations, inner emotions, and at times contradictory understandings of my experiences with participants.

After “Legends and Love,” Luis and I talked occasionally by phone for a several months about continuing the drama-based work we had done together but nothing materialized. When we did talk, our conversations were full of energy for new art- or drama-related projects, but we both seemed caught up in the freedom and the momentary irresponsibility that reckless brainstorming afforded. Looking back, our near runaway brainstorming sessions seemed to work as a kind of distraction or relationship-changing placeholder. These were unsure moments of realization for us both, moments that helped us transition from the intimate art-school-community-project bond that once defined our relationship with young people to another less intimate one that was only just taking shape and of which we were barely aware. While I often looked forward to these conversations with Luis after the performance, it was the months between our talks where we recalibrated our professional lives and made our own separate sense of the experience of “Legends and Love” and the momentary bonds we formed with four young high school performers. From an upstairs bedroom, I listened quietly as someone opened a door before closing it quietly behind. Footsteps followed each other across a painted wooden porch. Robert, Kesha, CJ, and Krista scattered soundlessly to new rooflines.

Luis was becoming well-known throughout the city for his remarkable productions as a high school theater director, and not long after the King celebration, he accepted a tenure-track position as Assistant Professor in the College of Arts and Media at a university in the city. He called after a few years. Painfully, the tenure-track pledge was proving to be a liability to his commitments and devotions

to young people, the Latino community, and local theater arts. I provided a tenure and promotion letter on his behalf. A year passed before we talked again. Disheartened and overwhelmed from the tenure promise, he informed me he was about to “begin a job selling health insurance through the federal Health Insurance Marketplace.” Outside, beneath dark utility lines, light rain evaporated from hot black asphalt, and silent row homes took a long deep choral breath. We spent time revisiting the stories of self-doubt and confusion into which the tenure process had cast him. In the closing minutes of our conversation, Luis shared what little he knew about Robert, Kesha, CJ, and Krista since the performance, and the memory of “Legends and Love” surfaced once more in my life. Call this, *The Story of Another Mysterious Tenure Decision and the Choreopoem Voices of Four High School Students*.

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