6-16-2022

Cultivating Creative Storytelling

Emma Kuli

Emma Kuli

Cultivating Creative Storytelling

This paper is an assortment of stories, successes, observations, and research that composed this project. Read this work as a frankenstein of beginnings, discoveries, and invitations. I hope that these stitched together creative writing curricula launch pads inspire future work, further research, and future writers!

***

The Pilot Program

From April 29th to May 27th, I lead a pilot creative writing program. A team of about ten Santa Clara University students worked closely with around fifteen fifth and sixth grade students from Santee Elementary. Writing from these talented young students is compiled in *All the Curious Poems: Crazy but Unique Stories from Young Writers*. This essay includes samples of student work and condensed clips from the pilot program's worksheets and lesson plans.

•••

I. Genesis: Writer-focused Writing: Centering Student Voice

The act of writing exists at the crossroads of creation. There is the prelude to writing, where the blank page is pregnant with possibility. There is the prologue of the product. A writer has generated something new. This creative third thing in the middle is transformative. Chaotic! The vulnerability of that creation is part of why severing the self from that process is so tempting, but there is something valuable in beginning writing from "I am". We'll come back to this.

Critical, antiracist analysis must fight back against the academic pressure to sever the ties between a product and the traveler who brought it to the page. This severing of physical processes from cognitive products weakens the rhythm and orality that is created in the body.

This split binds the writer's ability to create a full connection between the self and the writing product.

The separation of writer from writing has a long history within academia. It is a white habit of language to create writing from a position of anonymous distance. However, that anonymity is not powerful, but safe. It feels arrogant to place yourself within your writing. But there is an arrogance to the assumption that your perspective is not informed by the experiences you carry within your body.

Asao Inoue in his book *Above the Well: An Antiracist Argument from a Boy of Color* describes how the writing from an "Unseen, Naturalized Orientation to the World," reinforces exclusivity in academia, expecting and imposing a false universality of language and perspective. Current conventions of writing are based on the idea that there can be a "best" standard for academic writing style and language. This language hierarchy is founded in an implicit (upper-middle class, white) audience, created over the years of wealthy, white-dominated academic spaces thus acting as a crutch for the western socioeconomic ladder.

When we write and think about writing, we often restrict the conversation to the cognitive process and the end product. However, there is importance held within the physicality of the practice of writing. Typed, handwritten, or spoken, our stories come from our body. Poetry, writing, and voice are "carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives" (Lorde 37). Audrey Lorde's work highlights how texts emerge from our bodies and brains and the experiences held within our traveler physical form. Our bodies are deposits storing our experiential knowledge of the world. Writing is not created in a vacuum or from nothingness. This unique perspective gives every writer value and every writing voice value. A writer is empowered and limited by what experience they carry within themselves. This empowerment and embrace of the

particularity of perspective is something I hope to bring to the creative writing classroom.The objective of the creative writing teacher is to nurture student writers' unique voices. This means taking action to support physicality of process and individuality of product. This also means taking action to combat institutional oppression of the self in writing.

***

FINGERPRINTS

Crossing through the automatic front doors feels like crossing into the skeletal belly of a beast. Everything I hope for in this project exists outside of barred institutions like the OFFICE OF THE SHERIFF. Yet, fingerprinting for student safety is an understandable demand. The OFFICE OF THE SHERIFF building has a big, white gridded archway over the entrance that makes the station look eerily skeletal. Is the architecture intentionally intimidating?

Easter is around the corner when I enter the fingerprinting office, but whoever is in charge of decoration at the Sheriff's fingerprinting room wants to cover all their bases. They have decorations for every holiday up at once. Valentine's Day bears with Valentine's day hearts are crumpled in the corners of the room. Shamrock stickers dot various office supplies. A Thanksgiving turkey straddles one of the larger computers. Some of the red, white, and blue thrown up on the room seems to lean towards Fourth of July decoration rather than generalized patriotism. One decorative decision stands out to me in particular. Front and center across the glass division between patient and reception, the crown jewel of the schizophrenic holiday decor, is a giant Halloween window cling. This giant sticker depicts two bloody handprints and a blood-dripping outline of the word "help". This is a decoration that would be disturbing in October. This is a decoration that would be disturbing even housed outside of the OFFICE OF THE SHERIFF. But it is the centerpiece ornamentation of this police station in April.

After being bombarded by the schizophrenic holiday decor, those who cross into the Santa Clara Office of the Sheriff are greeted by a militaristic quantity of swaying sun shakers. You know those solar-powered plastic bobbles? This windowless office has a small army of every kind of sun shaker, in dense rows like a platoon. Why were there so many? They taunted me with the vibrancy of their plastic color and their ceaseless swaying in the sunless office.

I later learn that one of the volunteers actually asked the person working behind the front desk about the small militia of sun shakers.

"She…just giggled," he reports back to me with a smile. What a mystery at the fingerprinting office!

An officer has to press my finger into the scanner. I've never seen *Ghost*, but–entirely sans the sexuality–it reminds me of so many allusions to the pottery scene.

We're talking about my SSN, "it's not required, but you can provide it if you want".

"Unchained Melody" does not play in the background, but the intimacy of a disclosed social security seems to match the intimate vulnerability of giving a police station your fingerprint.

I think about fingerprints. They are the perfect metaphor for what I am trying to do with this program. Each student has a writing fingerprint, and the mentors need to guide them to get it down on paper. FINGERPRINTS! No one writer is the same. Their voices, rhythms, journeys with language all have unique ridges and bends, distinct to them alone.

***

The world's earliest stories were oral tradition. From folktales told to children, to incantations of creation myth, to recited verses, storytelling started as a spoken practice. So, our class began the same way. I think a great point of entry for considering storytelling "in the postcinema era of digital and interactive storytelling" is to start from the origination of narratives from the "social and fundamentally communal practice within the oral tradition" (Christie and Oever 12). This history grounds our understanding of storytelling as a need within the human community. In *Stories*, Ian Chrisie and Annie Oever position stories as "real-life examples of coping with the mystery of the human reality" (Chrisie and Oever). The telling of stories, then, has a specific social function in how we relate to one another and how we understand the cosmos. This understanding transforms the expectations of writing in two ways. First, within this context, storytelling is seen as an active, participatory process. The language of a story represents and interprets an experience of the world. When considering a student writer's participation in storytelling, we are considering how uplifting their stories is also a reaffirmation of the act of reflecting on and forming judgments on how they view their life experiences. Second, within this context, storytelling is seen as an exchange between a rhetor and an audience. Writing is often perceived as something static and disconnected. However, scholars like Keith Grant-Davie identify the many ways in which the exchange within a rhetorical triangle are "dynamic and interdependent" (Grant-Davie). Thus work with student rhetors must consider what audiences

these students are speaking to. Given the inherent network of exchange created by production of writing, construction of an antiracist classroom must consider what real and imagined audiences influence student writing. Real feedback on their work from a student mentor becomes an alternative to the implied (often oppressive) audience of academic expectations.

Writing is interrelated within the experiences which informed it, the effects of its interpretation of the human experience, and the dynamic exchanges that occur between a storyteller and their audiences. Thus, there is real meaning and real risk in how we construct the expectations within a creative space for young students. Development of student work must include an valuing of the ways in which their storytelling uniquely reflects on and interprets their human experiences.

The encouraging voice of Storytelling Mentors can speak over the hegemonic rhetorical expectation of white language and white audience. The Storytelling Mentor's presence as an encouraging rather than correcting audience further destabilizes the rhetorical triangle based in the implied audience of standardizing judgment.

To start student storytelling in a space where voice is privileged over mechanical corrections and connection, the first lesson also starts free from the expectations and standards latent within the medium of written language. Beginning in an auditory and oral space will encourage students to start from a place of *telling* a story in language that is closer to their personal voice than the voice they use within a scholarly context.

For the lesson plan, first, students will listen to an auditory story. For the pilot program, a mentor read the flash fiction work "Marine Layer" by Chi Ngo. Opening discussion will center on questions of storytelling which validate the community building folklores and fairytales of the modern world.

What stories have you been told? What story were you told recently? Students will also be prompted to practice storytelling by having mentors tell a story about their day as a model. Then, students will tell their mentor a story. The mentor will record a short voice memo of this student's spoken story. This can be a fragment of a story, like the details of a setting or a character. This can be an entire story. This can be nonfiction. This can be an outrageous fantasy. It is impossible to deconstruct narrative expectations and linguistic hierarchies, but the space of oral storytelling should honor multi-medium work and invite less formal, academic language usage in expressions of storytelling ideas.

Next, students will identify the components that emerged in their spoken text. Students will be asked to write one sentence from your story that they really liked. From there, the students write into these identified pieces from their spoken storytelling if time permits.

***

Prompts from the Day One workbook page are included below:

Day One: Voice

Everyone has a unique voice. No two writers use language the same way.

I wanted to destabilize the conventional restrictions placed on language in the classroom, so we opened with an activity that asked students to make up a new word. The idea was that this would get creativity flowing and break down the suffocating walls of academic language expectations. However, in the pilot classroom, this activity was not super successful. Maybe it was because students needed to warm up before generating a new dictionary, but students were hesitant to create new words.

Warm Up: Class Dictionary

We're going to create a class dictionary. Everyone in the room gets to make up a new word.

My new word is the word:

It's pronounced:

My new word means:

***

Pro tip! When you don't know an answer, just shrug and say Kalado.

Ka•la•do
/Kæ lʌ du/
Exclamation

1. *I don't know!*; Used to express a lack of knowledge

***

The discussion following a reading of "Marine Layer" by Chi Ngo included the questions:

What do you remember from the story?

Think
What stories were you told growing up?

Discuss
What's one story you told recently?

The second activity was more successful than the first. Students were excited to have a listening ear!

Storytelling Activity

1. Tell a story. It can be a true story about your life or it can be a fictional story. Have a mentor record the story you told with a voice recorder.

2. Before listening back to your story, jot down what you remember from your story.

    - Where: Did your story have a specific setting.

    - Who: Did your story include any characters?

    - What: What happened to the character in your story?

3. Listen back to your story. Write one sentence from your story that you really liked.

4. Writing Prompt: Start a story. It must include your favorite line from the story you told.

***

SORA

The Santee classroom isn't restricted to one language. The students toss Spanish words into their English. Whispered gossip is in Spanish too, until one of the mentors responds to their giggle-filled whispers in Spanish, and they realize we generally understand their Spanish and their English.

At first I think she's just quiet, but one student sits quietly at the bench because she doesn't understand our English or our Spanish. Thu asks for Google Translate.

"I don't understand," she says.

Somewhat hesitantly, I let her type away into the Google Translate app on my phone. As I'm pinballing between tables, checking on the other students, she types and types and types into my phone. I hope that she hasn't switched over to Doodle Jump. I trust that she won't turn the writing time into a iPhone takeover selfie-session (like I may have done in Fifth grade). When I return she has written a stunning snapshot, translated by the search engine tool, beautiful in both languages.

Sora

tôi là sora là một người không thích mùa	I'm Sora, a person who doesn't like winter,
đông và không muốn rời khỏi vòi sen có	and doesn't want to leave the hot shower
nước nóng và đi đến nhà anh em họ để	and go to my cousin's house to have to get
phải vào một chiếc xe lạnh cóng chiếc xe	into a freezing cold car. The car doesn't
không đủ chỗ để cho tôi dủi thẳng chân	have enough room to let me straighten my
trong vài giờ và tôi kiếm được vài cuốn	legs for a few hours, and I found some
sách trong cặp và chx bóc hộp tôi đã lấy	books in my bag and opened the box. I
một trong những cuốn sách trong đó và ba	took one of the books in it, and my dad
tôi đã đọc cho tôi nghe nhưng tôi cũng	read it to me, but I also didn't want to
không muốn vì mình mà ảnh hưởng đến	affect everyone's fun so I just kept my
cuộc vui chơi của mọi người nên tôi chỉ	emotions to myself until the end of the

giữ cảm xúc cho riêng mình cho đến hết game.

cuộc vui chơi

***

II. The Paradox of Language in the Creative Writing Classroom

Classroom standards patrol language borders, enforcing rigid boundaries of academic language. In *Above the Well*'s "Racializing Language Standards," Inoue highlights the difference between language norms and language standards. Where language norms "tend to be descriptive," arising organically from a community of language speakers, language standards "are prescriptive by nature," and thus imposed on a community. (Inoue 98). In one case language develops between communicating individuals. In the second case, language is restricted and becomes a tool for restriction.

The antiracist creative writing classroom is filled with apparent contradictions. In our interview, Asao Inoue described the important paradox that arises when teaching writing and working with language in a classroom, because "most of the English speakers in the world globally do not speak the standardized English that we promote in colleges and schools" (Inoue 00:00:43). Dominance of oppressive linguistic hierarchy outside of the classroom is not something teachers will be able to quickly or easily resolve. Instead, these paradoxes, this problem of long histories of white language supremacy within academia, is something teachers of writing must acknowledge: "It's not a problem we're going to solve. It's a problem we're going to confront. It's a problem that we're going to walk around with every day of our lives" (Inoue 00:00:43). Work in the antiracist writing space is a journey within that paradox. Students explore the possibility of their languaging, beyond the narrow conventions set by usage of standard, academic English.

Opportunity emerges from the contradictions generated by these paradoxes. The creative writing classroom cannot erase the long historical and complex politics of language hierarchy that exists outside of anti-racist spaces (and inevitably permeates the creative writing classroom). However, recognizing the paradox of developing student writing outside of those oppressive conventions is an invitation. In *Transformation Now!* Analouise Keating describes how pedagogies of invitation which "invite and evoke but do not impose change on students," creates opportunities for transformation (Keating 183). This openness depends on the flexibility and humility of the teacher.

***

EVIL F**K: A MOMENT OF PERSONAL FAILURE

Giggles start to bubble up from the farthest cafeteria table. The girls pass around a paper with whispers.

"F!"

"Evil F!"

"She wrote Evil F!"

Oh god, I think, *one of the students wrote a swear word*. I had anticipated in a room full of fifth graders, someone would drop an F-bomb or slide profanity into their prose. This, however, was not what had happened.

Each student had a typed version of their work tucked into their folders as a little surprise. One thing about working in groups is that shared ideas start to weave the writings of each group together. This table's motif was ducks. Ducks and ducklings had waddled into everyone's screenplay. One student had written about an evil duck. I had typed her fun, creative, appropriate story. But in the late night that I'd spent typing up these screenplays, my typo had transfigured her evil duck into something much more malicious.

"evil fuck" was spelled out in my printed Times New Roman. I saw it with my own eyes. Thankfully, the students were able to move past the silliness and excitement of my profane mistake quickly. I was impressed by how quickly. "evil fuck" would have been equal parts scandalous and hilarious when I was 12.

All this is to say that even if it wasn't essential to the openness of the anti-racist creative writing classroom, humility is a gift, because teachers are going to make mistakes too.

***

Keating discusses how this non-oppositional pedagogical shift reduces the amount of control educators have in the classroom, as a teacher "can invite transformation into [their] own thinking, but [... they] can neither predict or direct it" (Keating 185). Thu exemplifies a benefit to flexibility and humility. I didn't create the lesson play anticipating a use for a translating tool, but trusting her with my pocket translator allowed for the generation of a beautiful, bilingual piece of writing. Keating's understanding of the non-oppositional pedagogy unfolds with mostly changes for the teachers. It is through, "educator's flexibility, open-mindedness, and willingness to be changed by what and who [they] teach" that transforms the creative writing classroom. It is a cliché to say *really I like to think the students teach me*, and yet I was transformed by the reward of the flexibility of this moment. Lesson planning is nerve-wracking. Worksheet lines that will rigidly impose predictable order on what students will create soothes the bubbling fear that without intense surveillance, there will be chaotic classroom coup.

***

TACTICAL (RE)NAMING: A MOMENT OF CLASSROOM COUP

These folders are fancy. I'm very intentional about this. The folders look super professional. I want these folders to be like certificates of the student's serious writer status–symbols of value and validation, with their names on them! Yes, each student gets to sharpie their name on a shiny, Santa Clara red folder with that pretentious glittering SCU logo on the front. How can a folder be pretentious? I don't know, but these folders are!

When I hand out these pretentious folders, the students take notice of the serifed university logo and the shine of the folders.

"Santa Clara University," one student reads.

I ask the students their names and they pause. Big grins spread across their small faces. I haven't asked a question, I've handed them an opportunity.

"JIMMYSTEVEN!" Jimmy/Steven says. My eyes narrow. He's lying. I can tell from the giggles in his eyes and the giggles of the table.

Soon every student is creating a pseudonym or multiple

Steven/Jimmy *is an artist and an athlete. He likes to write about funny stuff. His writing is unique because he's built different.*

But allowing that silliness shifts the tone of the classroom. They should be taken seriously as writers. How could they not with those pretentious folders they have! However, writing isn't inaccessible, and it isn't boring. It's fun. Instead of being stomped out, the energy in the classroom continues to explode and then is poured into the hilarious, unique stories that students come up with. The students, not reprimanded by but encouraged by the mentors dotted among them, are excited that this opportunity is not the same as their academic classroom. This isn't a tug of war for classroom control. It is a creative community. It's an invitation. It is what they want it to be. And so are they! They can be writer Jimmy/Steven.

***

III. The Anxious Racism of Standardization

Creativity is somewhat chaotic! The impulse to restrict and control the classroom is one of anxious power. Institutions model restrictive and imposing power as the blueprint for order, but restriction doesn't cultivate creativity. Language tools need to be offered to students and not used against them.

More than just limiting creativity, imposition of Standard American English reinforces racist standardization. Setting grammatical and linguistic hurdles in front of students as they write creates obstacles for literacy which disproportionately detriment students whose language habits (English of Englishes) further vary from the imposed English.

Students may still be assessed along the yardsticks set by standardized language outside of the antiracist classroom. When I asked Asao Inoue about the potential pressures created by the reality that students will be measured along normative language standards outside of his antiracist classroom, he said, "As a teacher who tries hard every day to cultivate an anti-racist orientation to my teaching, to my students, to myself, to my world, to my institutions that I work in, I don't feel ethically obligated to prepare my students for a racist tomorrow or to become racists by adhering to racist ideology, racist langauge, or racist standards. That is standards that

become racist by being the only standard" (Inoue 00:08:04). The work in anti-racist classroom is not about whittling student language down to one "best" way of writing, but instead about finding, arranging, exploring and comparing a wide variety of ways of expression (Inoue 00:00:43). This journey with language doesn't require a universal standard. The antiracist classroom is a space that does not compromise with white supremacy standardization. Yes, outside of this classroom students will be asked to adhere their language use and writing to academia's mechanical standards white habits of language.

This fearful standardization of learning is often justified by rhetoric of "rigor". However, helping students with that development means addressing the paradoxes of working in an antiracist classroom and recognizing how all language is valuable doesn't erase rigor. On the contrary, working outside of the limitations set by universalized language standards demands more rigor from the students and teachers of the antiracist creative writing classroom when done right, "It's going to be political work, it's going to be historic work, it's going to be practical work" (Inoue 00:00:43). Writing teachers must offer the language tools they have to the student without using that linguistic tool kit against their students. A teacher may tell a student "this is how I experience your text as a text. Let me tell you what I'm comparing you to and not to say you need to be like these other texts and these other comparisons, but instead to say [...] I want you to know why I'm having this response to your text and why I have these expectations and where they are coming from." (Inoue 00:08:04). Then, Inoue asserts, the student can use that information to inform the decisions they make in revision and development of their writing.

***

A note on feedback I give the team!

Where institutional standardization of writing may charge writing by a student for a teacher with an impulse towards white langage habits, Storytelling Mentors must offer feedback that validates the student's distinct voice. In our interview, Asao Inoue distinguished that writing teachers must offer the language tools they have to the student without using that linguistic tool kit against their students. A teacher may tell a student "this is how I experience your text as a text. Let me tell you what I'm comparing you to and not to say you need to be like these other texts and these other comparisons, but instead to say [...] I want you to know why I'm having this response to your text and why I have these expectations and where they are coming from" (Inoue 00:08:04). Then, Inoue asserts, the student can use that information to inform the decisions they make in revision and development of their writing.

***

Assessment of student work isn't dependent on grades or revisions. In our interview, Inoue described how in order to confront the problem of white language supremacy and ensure that we are valuing a variety of Englishes, students should acknowledge personal goals for how they want to develop their writing and how they work with language.

Revision in Inoue's classroom includes peers writing letters which discuss their thoughts on the writing. The writer, interpreting their feedback, will look for commonalities in feedback letters. This is generally successful! In my written notes I generally focus on listening to student work to see what is going well.

***

KISSING SHREK

I try not to edit the student work too much, but I'm not sure what to do when I come across this line from Eduardo's story.

Once upon a time I was in a white and old mansion. Shrek was next to me, so me and Shrek were sleeping together, so we woke up, and we started making breakfast.

I decide to change Eduardo's story to:

Once upon a time I was in a white and old mansion. Shrek was sleeping next to me, so we woke up, and we started making breakfast.

I hope I am doing the right thing. Throughout the class, Eduardo's work draws on humor and narrative structure I don't quite understand. He has a clear understanding of his audience, as all the jokes land with his table. He has clearly witnessed a wide variety of internet content.

IV. Habits of Western Narrative

Storytelling will be a powerful point of entry for the necessary paradigmatic shift in academic language and writing conventions. As insistent as some dominant forces may be that the western narrative structure is the universal, best, and only way to tell a story, counter examples of nonwestern storytelling traditions that take a diverse array of storytelling shapes are abundantly available to contradict this argued singularity. The academic essay is tensely bound by a universalized, dominating, long-held aesthetic of a perceived neatless, logic, cohesion, and clarity. The rigid structural patterning within western storytelling is a recent colonizer. No matter its seeming conquest of modern storytelling, this currently dominating narrative order is dwarfed by a massive multitude of rich storytelling histories and traditions. Storytelling as a cultural practice is pre-verbal (Christie and Orver 11). This counterexample rich history of storytelling outside of western standardization gives storytelling an inevitably wider wiggle room that the American classroom's academic testing and essays lack. Storytelling's history is extensive, varied, and interconnected. This long-spanning storytelling ecology is only bent to adherence to Standard American English within standardized testing and classroom settings.

It's important that students gain confidence in their writing ability. Creative writing can be a great way to develop communication skills. However, Inoue's book highlights an important

effect of standardization: many bilingual students are ranked lower within a classroom setting based on how their language habits adhere to standardized language (Inoue). As false as their assumptions are, standardizing assumptions order modern academic spaces.Standard American English and associated habits of white language are imposed as the standard for academic writing from early to higher education (Inoue). Therefore, student agency and control is key to the anti-racist classroom.

***

BREAKTHROUGH

There is a week that Darwin refuses to write a single word. And yet, this week Darwin has written this devastatingly beautiful poem. It still holds that resistance. He is painting a self-portrait of his previous reluctance at the workbench. Even so, it is a lovely snapshot. I am struck by how he weaves deeper meaning and rhythm into the poem with the unique and haunting enjambment decisions.

The Sun Facing the Sun

Darwin sat
at the forest
green bench. Sun bounced off his brown locks
as he laid his head
on his arm.

***

We see the molding of western narrative forms unfold through the imposition of an Aristotelian classical arc, Freytag's pyramid, the influence of the hero's journey as set universalized expectations for constructions of contemporary narratives, in the classroom and in the media consumed by young students. Gustav Freytag, Aristotle, and Joseph Campbell are all western voices. Stories from nonwestern cultures have included climactic arcs, but to say all storytelling follows these western-defined structural arcs ignores a plethora of diversely shaped counterexample narratives.

Ana Louise Keating in *Transformation Now!: Toward a Post Oppositional Politics of Change* describes how the "belief in self-centered, atomistic individualism is deeply ingrained in

contemporary U.S. culture and viewed as an essential, uniquely American theme as well as a distinguishing mark of U.S. literary classics" (Keating 69). The "status quo story" of American Individualism is a problem in both social narratives and literary works. The hyper individuals of the canon are generally cisgendered, white, middle-class, straight, men (Keating 70). The social narrative of individualism empowers a subordination of all marginalized by the privileged norm. This isolation of the unitary self orients the individual towards an othering outlook. Moving through the world with the lens of a dual order splitting self from surroundings leads to the lonely road of hyperindidualism and the oppressive dominance of hierarchical dualism.

Hyper individualism is an important warrant for capitalist cultural narratives like the American Dream. Assumption of heroic hyper individualism reflects the western landscape of competition rather than collaboration, social hierarchy rather than equality, and dominance rather than community. Thus hyper individualism and how it shapes contemporary western storytelling cannot be taken as global or universal. Patterns in the vast ecologies of storytelling that span cultures and time can be appreciated and studied in past work but should not be a regulation on storytelling, imposed in new content creation.

Part of the paradox of the anti-racist writing classroom is that it is hoping to work within frameworks outside of the dual order that organizes the narrative, political, and social structures outside of that space. The formulaic habits that dominate Hollywood's storytelling landscapes heighten standardization of stories. This universalism and other imposed standardization within the classroom empower the hierarchical dualisms which marginalize and other languages, writing, voices, and people outside of the privileged "norm." Colin Irvine in "Teaching American Literature Inside a Box: A Narrative Based Approach to Instruction," highlights how even narratives that include multidimensional, intertextual, hybridized, and dynamic "postmodern

storyworlds" are often taught in a way which emphasizes stasis and their ties to patterned, formulaic literary structures (Irvine 67). Irvine argues for a focus on teaching narrative that frames student understanding of texts within an examination of the dynamic relationship between the text and the world and the textured, layered, multidimensional space created within the story. The stasis and redundant modeling Irvine identifies in how storytelling is taught is also seen in how students learn to write stories. Where narrative storytelling should be an escape from the rigid standardized structure of the five paragraph essay, storytelling lessons often start from a place of homogenizing structural outline. Glenda Hambly argues that teachings restricted to the storytelling structure founded in a three act, hero's journey with a classical narrative arc visions of a narrative impose an anglo-western story mold as a universal narrative shape (Hambly). The beginning, middle, and end are plotted out to match a classical western arc. Simpler iterations of Freytag's pyramid dictate how students will draft their writing. Building of characters is often based on archetypal blueprints for how the characters of a storyworld should interact and reinforce the climatic mountain shape of the static, linear story plot. Where there is beauty in the shape of a classical arc, a climactic wave, a peaking rise in tension and fall in action, the imposition of this shape as the only story structure in the classroom greatly narrows what storytelling looks like.

The continued influence of Christopher Vogler's seven page monomyth memo, Joseph Campbell's The Hero with a Thousand Faces book, and the following the hero's journey structuring has disturbing origination and troubling implications for modern storytelling (Icabobo). The flaws in Joseph Campbell's "The Hero with a Thousand Faces" research and subsequent *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* writings remain relevant as the ideologies of this text remain foundational for screenwriting practices and teaching. This work, which continues to

be used as a template for new storytelling, exemplifies an imposition of white perspective as universal and exclusively correct within creative writing.

If we were to tell this story as a hero's journey, then, Joseph Campbell would be our protagonist. He is our white, male, hyper individualistic hero. Joseph studied one hundred myths. Things that are wrong with Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* include:

1. Campbell, a white man, assumed that he could distill myth structures to universal archetypes from his (white, singular) perspective
2. Campbell only studied one hundred myths. Many different cultures have many different myths. Many of which he could not and did not access. Many of which he would not have the cultural context (and did not seek out the cultural context) to understand (Hambly). A sample of one hundred myths is incomplete.
3. Campbell assumes storytelling takes place in linear time. The notion that there is such predictable underlying structure to all storytelling is reductive and false.
4. Campbell's interpretation of at least three[1] myths as following his narrative mold is incorrect (Hambly).

The universalized hero is hyperindividualism embodied. He must leave home to go on his quest. Luke Skywalker. Harry Potter. Frodo. Batman. Charlie Bucket. He is often seen as a universal hero, relatable in his universalized white, male, cisgender, hetersexual, able-bodied orientation towards the world. This hero is almost always a white screen surrogate. We generally see his language take on the same apolitical universalism. Visual narrative storytelling and status-quo social storytelling alike assume "the radically independent Adamic American self"

[1] The nonlinear cosmological framework of Australian Aboriginal myth, for one example, defies Campbell's universalizing claims (Hambly).

(Keating 67). Stories in the western model expect that an individual isolates himself to embark on a quest away from his community.

Harry can leave Private Drive, because he is a wizard. Charlie finds the golden ticket (to adventure!). Luke sets out from Tatooine because he has the force. "I work alone," says Mr. Incredible. The hero's journey begins when he is called away from his community based on his individual exceptionalism. There are a lot of comparisons to be drawn between habits of white language and habits of western storytelling. The arc, patterns, linearity, and order of beginning, middle and end oriented narrative structure are often seen as ordered and thus (exclusively) correct.

Few popular films stray from some form of the western hero's journey model. Joseph Campbell's hero's journey became a deeply influential "ready made tool to devise plots" (Ambasciano 259). Creator of the massively popular and influential Star Wars franchise George Lucas specifically cited the hero's journey as a model for his construction of hero Luke Skywalker's space adventure (Ambasciano 259). The permeation of this westernizing writing formula is networked and broad, both in how the "Hero With a Thousand Faces" memo is used directly to model film narrative structures and in how new writing mimics and uses as an authoritative example films which were modeled after this formula. This standardized narrative structure imposes a clarity, order, and control on storytelling and then claims that all good stories follow this same path.

Let's write a screenplay!

Does your screenplay take place inside or outside?
What is the setting of your screenplay?
What time of day is it when your screenplay starts? Is it day or night?
Based on your answers above, we can write your scene heading.

Circle: Write setting: Circle

(inside) INT. or (outside) EXT – _____ – Night / Day

Character name
Character age
What is your character doing at the beginning of the scene?
What is one item of clothing your character is wearing?
Character 2 name
Character 2 age
What is Character 2 doing at the beginning of the scene?
What is one item of clothing Character 2 is wearing?
Now, make your characters say something!

Draw one object from the hat! Write a screenplay where character one has the item and character two wants that item. What happens?

***

EXT. A CLOUD - DAY

BAILEY (14) is waking up. She is in her pajamas. WAFFLES (2 (in human years)) is still sleeping. Waffles is wearing a bowtie.

BAILEY

Waffles?! I thought you died? Woah, where are we?

WAFFLES

I am dead. You're in heaven.

BAILEY

Woah...you can talk? How am I in heaven?

Bailey finds some gold.

BAILEY (CONT'D)
Ooo...GOLD?

WAFFLES
Woah, woah, woah...slow down! We're in heaven, so that's why I can talk, you're in heaven because you died, and THIS IS MY GOLD!

BAILEY
Awww! I wanted the gold...Wait! How did I die?

WAFFLES
I don't know that Angel will tell you...

Angel enters.

ANGEL
Hi! My name's Angelina, and I will be your Angel Guide for the week.

Lesly's screenplay could be the script for a (hilarious) Tik Tok or Youtube Reel. It's fast-paced. It has that punch and morbidity of internet humor! Yet, this opening into the unknown could also be the first steps into a hero's journey. As new and diverse the meme ecology is, it expands upon (rather than exists outside of) layered ties to Hollywood narratives.

This expanding web creative production offers exciting new frontiers for creativity. With the internet, it seems new content, structures, and mediums have *entered the chat*.

***

VI. The Invitation in New Mediums

Poetry is a generative medium for antiracist work, because its celebration of deviation from language standardization and regulation more easily invites an imaginative transcendence of narrative conventions and structural expectations.

Poetry is harder to standardize than prose. Students have been, through oral and visual storytelling warm ups, handed creative frameworks that encourage storytelling that evolves outside of the restrictions of language standards and narrative conventions. Poetry as a medium has a long history of creative expression which defies linguistic restrictions including the expectation of white habits of language and the demand for standardized language mechanics. For that reason, student exploration of poetry should encourage poetic language usage, usage of language that champions expression and creativity over academic expectation and the habits of white language notion of "clarity" (Inoue).

***

Day Four • Poetry!

Brainstorm

Nouns

List things you see in nature:

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

Adjectives

What are three words you would use to describe your favorite:

Animal:

1.
2.
3.

Food

1.
2.
3.

Place

1.
2.
3.

Verbs

What are three things a rock cannot do?

1.
2.
3.

Activity One: Poetry Mad Lib

A _____ _____
Adjective 1 Noun 1

is like a _____ _____ .
Adjective 2 Noun 2

Both _____ . Neither _____.
Verb 1 Verb 2

But a _____ _____ cannot
Adjective 1 Noun 1

_____ like a _____ _____ .
Verb 3 Adjective 2 Noun 2

***

A loud tree
is like a green cloud.
Both fly. Neither die.
But a loud tree cannot
skateboard like a green cloud.

***

Activity Two: Poetry activity inspired by “Otter”

Think of something from nature: _____

1. List 3 words to describe this thing:
2. What is this thing doing?
3. What does it look like when it moves?
4. Where is this thing? (What setting is this thing in?)
5. List 3 words to describe the setting: :
6. What emotion does this thing feel?

Think of one more from nature: _____

1. What does this second thing from nature look like?
2. What is this second thing from nature doing?
3. What does it look like when it moves?
4. How does this second thing from nature feel?

Describe how these two things from nature are connected:

Writing activity: Write a poem about something in nature!

Haiku by Kobayashi Issa

牛の子が	Ushi no ko ga	The baby cow
旅に立つなり	Tabi ni tatsu nari	Goes on a trip.
秋の雨	Aki no ame	In the autumn rain.

Haikus are very simple and short. They give one image. Even so, notice that Kobayashi Issa creates a vivid picture with descriptions of the baby *cow and the* autumn *rain.*

"New Math" by Nikki Grimes

"Otter" by Alison Hart

***

MEME ECOLOGY

Remember the student story excerpt about kissing Shrek? Eduardo's journey in our pilot program exemplifies one important discovery I made during this project. I am filled with great hope for the ways in which I witnessed student writing transcend the restriction narrative structures.

On one level, students' deep understanding of vast and varied internet content offered powerful alternatives to the limited and standardized narratives of western film and the literary canon. As I will further explore below, the videos, memes, and posts of the internet impacted the thinking and writing I saw in the students of the pilot program. User5052's meme page may have more cultural influence on the younger generation's storytelling than George Lucas and F. Scott Fitzgerald. The meme ecology frontier begs for further exploration.

However, another source of hope for me was witnessing how the student's nature poetry constructed cosmological landscapes which repeatedly transcended hierarchical dualism between humans and nature. Meme expert Eduardo's nature poem especially asserts a stunning message for ecological justice.

The Nature's Plan

Plants are so green they look like cash
But you don't get it if you don't work fast.
Trees are kind
They how the world needs to be
Maybe some people need to be free.
People need water
So do the plants
Some plants need to dance
Some people too.

His poem is a masterpiece with a clear rhythm, slant rhymes, and personification. This writing crafts a powerful underlying cosmological landscape of ecological interconnectivity.

He reads his poem for the miniature slam we hold at the elementary school lunch benches. He smiles, proud of his work when everyone snaps, snaps, snaps for the reading. He copies the poem down on a second paper, explaining that he wants to enter it into the young poet contest the school is holding. He is a young poet.

***

Whether describing literary or meme ecologies, students are modeling their work after different story structures. They are post-cinema. These structures are the narrative models of Internet content. Beyond English or Spanish, their internet language is all Greek to me.

V. Navigating the Wild West of an Elementary Meme Ecology

In a classroom where we are thinking about communication, in language and creative expression and we are thinking about textual knowledge, the content that students are drawing on in their language usage and creative expression, memes and internet narratives are even more relevant than cinematic and literary sources, because of the quantity of the memes that students are exposed to and because of the context in which students are viewing this intertextual cultural information.

What falls under the umbrella of "meme" includes a large number of different texts, which are deeply intertextual and markedly ephemeral. In the 2020 episode, "Why Do Memes Matter," Vox journalist Christophe Haubursin described one reason the memes interwoven within student work were so hard to fully grasp, even from our group of young mentors (who were well-versed in their own meme realms): "Memes are at their core an inside joke. They are a reference that an in group gets and an out group doesn't get" (Haubursin 1:04-1:10). Even though I and the other mentors encounter manifold meme content on the daily, the algorithmic and contextual differences in our spheres of the internet dramatically divided what internet ingroup we were a part of and what internet ingroup the students were a part of. By the nature of algorithms, each internet landscape is somewhat adapted to its user.

Eduardo wrote about kissing Shrek. I know *Shrek*. I was only one when the first movie came out, but I saw *Shrek the Third* in theaters, about three years before these students were born. I am familiar with Shrek and I am even familiar with (some) Shrek memes, but I am not familiar with whatever Shrek memes these fifth graders are inspired by. This writing referencing kissing Shrek alludes to a complex context of cultural information I am not privy to. I scour the internet for a clear cut understanding of what this meme is. However, the nature of memes evades traditional research discovery. Memes are better understood as holons, intrinsically part

of a larger system (Keating 177). The word meme started as simply the idea of "unit of cultural inheritance [...] that passes from one person to the next" from ethologist Richard Dawkins' book *The Selfish Gene* (Haubursin 3:09-3:38). Because of how they are defined by interconnectivity and remarkably rapid life cycles, memes are better understood as a language or ecosystem (or a virus!) because of their intrinsically fleeting nature and their interdependence on a larger, intertextual body of internet knowledge. The Know Your Meme database can (and does) describe how Shrek as a character and the Shrek franchise cult following have made Shrek related content a continual, common, interlocking feature among internet humor content.

The patterns within meme culture create new structural influence on student thinking, student language, and student writing. Because students are consuming such a large volume of internet content, meme culture may have even more influence on narrative patterning than the narrative conventions in films and literature. Students' consumption of internet content within the context of ingroup also elevates how influential that cultural information will be to how they interpret their world. Young writers are navigating dense ecosystems of intertextual internet humor. Additionally, the content online is created by and presented within a context of commonality. Fifth graders share memes by and from generally younger people. Many personalized platforms connect internet users based on shared interests. Literary texts assigned in the classroom are presented in an academic context. The readings are assigned by an educator. Internet narrative includes an authority of peerhood that literary and film content lacks. By design, commonalities between internet content consumers and internet content creators will be greater than commonalities between a student and F. Scott Fitzgerald or George Lucas. The accessibility of novels and films is also greater than the inside joke of fifth grader Shrek memes.

Where academia is policed by rigid narrative and linguistic structure, the internet is a wild west of languages and information systems. The narrative structures of memes lack the detrimental conventions of the literary canon and offer diverse, continuously evolving language and narrative pattern alternatives to the formulaic habits of western film. Thus, there is great creative possibility and potential benefit in the diversity and openness of the internet's competitive new ecology of media. However, memes as a transformative cultural influence include great risk for a young audience. "Why Do Memes Matter" dives into how the historical context defining the evolution of memes informs their context as contemptuous to outgroups, lightning-speed life cycles, and tendency toward problematic content. Although few internet users use 4chan as a platform, meme formats and meme culture originated on the site and thus the norms for systems of meme content–their lifespan and aesthetic–are rooted in the landscape of this fringe internet platform (Hausbursin 9:10-12:15). It's worth noting that memes have a long history of basing humor in racial and sexual violence (Hausbursin 9:10-12:15). Given the intertextual nature of meme ecologies, meme culture is inseparable from disturbing usage of meme narrative formatting. The wild west internet may lack academia's restrictive standardization of language, but it remains plagued by socioeconomic hierarchy. Internet culture's racist and sexual norms render the lanscape of internet media especially inappropriate for young audiences. The interconnected openness of the internet and meme culture include an openness and interconnection to problematic content.

Generally, the hilarious content that comes from these internet-inspired writers gives me hope that this paradigmatic shift in storytelling structure holds progressively deconstructive possibilities and great potential creative benefit.

VII . "I AM" Writing

The day five lesson play opens with the line:

“You are a writer, here are some tools. WRITE! WRITE! WRITE!”

Originally, we were going to have students have a day focused on revision. But

Brainstorm: A poetic device toolbox

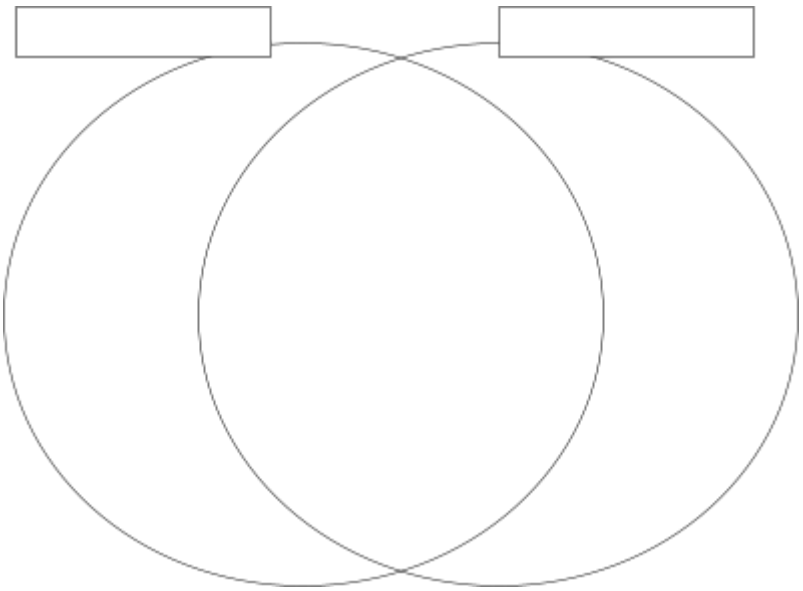
1. **Simile** (one thing is compared to another thing)

Compare two things

A _____ is like a _____ because _____.

A _____ is like a _____ because _____.

A _____ is like a _____ because _____.



2. **Personification (**something nonhuman does something humans do)

The wind howled! The sun smiled! The trees danced!

Make something that’s not human do something that humans do:

The thing:

What is it doing?

3. **Alliteration:** (the sounds at the beginning of words repeat)

Will wrote wonderful words

Write a sentence where (almost) every word begins with the same sound:

4. **Rhyme** (the sounds at the ends of words repeat)

tree/bee

write a list of words that rhyme

Activity 1

About the Author (YOU)

Name:

Age:

I am a

- ☐ POET
- ☐ SCREENWRITER
- ☐ FICTION WRITER
- ☐ NONFICTION WRITER
- ☐ ARTIST
- ☐ _____

I like to write about:

My writing is unique because

Our class book title is:

Activity 2: Write a poem or a short story starting with the words

I am…

That was what I wanted students to take from this program:

1. The chance to see themselves as a writer, the change to identify with a creative identity

***

I Am

I am funny
I like bunnies
I have many buddies

I am a volleyball player
I'm also a baker
And don't forget kinda a trouble-maker

I am super weird
I have no beard
and like deers

I am an artist
Umm kinda a stylist
And have a large playlist

***

2. The tools to express themselves through creative writing

GOODBYE WITH A POEM

Soledad pulls out her journal. This isn't from a worksheet. This wasn't during class time. She took what we learned from class and wrote a poem on her own time. She reads it to me:

Left Behind
I'd never ever felt this way
until you had to say goodbye
a feeling of loss so intense
it's like I actually might die
I can't eat. I can't sleep.
your face is all that I
see
my chest feels so tight
sometimes I can't even
breathe
for it's not like you've just
moved
from one town to the
next
where you've gone I cannot
Follow
unless I take dramatic steps
just carrying on with a
short life
like a
minion

I am stunned. What a goodbye.

“You are a poet,” I say.

This is a moment of transcendence, where the work done within the classroom could not be contained within those classroom walls. I hope that this poet sees herself as a poet. I hope she follows that writing identity, that passion, and her talented voice. That was everything I’d hoped this project could invite.

Works Cited

Alison, Jane. *Meander, Spiral, Explode: Design and Pattern in Narrative*., 2019. Print.

Ambasciano, Leonardo. "The Trials and Tribulations of Luke Skywalker: How The Walt Disney Co. and Lucasfilm Have Failed to Confront Joseph Campbell's Troublesome Legacy." *Implicit Religion* (2021): n. pag.

Anzaldu a, Gloria. Borderlands =: La Frontera. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999. Print.

Fishman, Jenn, et al. "Bad Ideas about Writing." *Composition Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2019, pp. 191–97. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.scu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=EIS136122921&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Christie, Ian and Oever, Annie. *Stories*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018. https://doi.org/10.1515/9789048537082

Grant-Davie, Keith. "Rhetorical Situations and Their Constituents." *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 15, no. 2, 1997, pp. 264–79. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/465644. Accessed 10 Jun. 2022.

Haubursin, Christophe, director. *Why Do Memes Matter? - Glad You Asked S1*. *Youtube*, Vox, 8 Oct. 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bYJZA86dPEo&feature=youtu.be. Accessed 9 June 2022.

Icabobo, Maria C. "THE BIZ; A Memo's Journey." *Los Angeles Times*, 13 Nov. 1994, p. 8. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.scu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsnba&AN=0EB431379AEC7CF5&site=eds-live.

Irvine, Colin. "Teaching American Literature Inside the Box: A Narrative-Based Approach to Instruction." *Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice*, vol. 7, no. 1–2, 2014, pp. 53–70. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.scu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=2015875315&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Inoue, Asao B. *Above The Well: An Antiracist Argument From a Boy of Color*. WAC Clearinghouse, 2021. *EBSCOhost*, https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.scu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mlf&AN=202122991658&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Keating, AnaLouise. *Transformation Now!: Toward a Post-Oppositional Politics of Change*. University of Illinois Press, 2013. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt3fh5zv. Accessed 10 Jun. 2022.

Inoue, Asao and Kuli, Emma. "Imagining an Antiracist Writing Classroom Interview." 25 Oct. 2021.

Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 1984. Print.

Murray, Donald M. "All Writing Is Autobiography." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 42, no. 1, Feb. 1991, pp. 66–74. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi-org.libproxy.scu.edu/10.2307/357540.

Roozen, Kevin, et al. "Writing Is a Social and Rhetorical Activity." *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*, edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, University Press of Colorado, 2015, pp. 17–34. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt15nmjt7.8. Accessed 10 Jun. 2022.