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Theme 2: **Storytelling**

Introduction

The first reading I assign to 12th graders each year is Parker Palmer's "Now I Become Myself." In this short narrative essay, Palmer describes the tensions of becoming "the person one has always been." Palmer argues that in the process of becoming oneself, "we mask ourselves in faces that are not our own" and that we must go through a "dissolving and shaking of ego...before we discover our deep identity," our "true self" (Palmer). While Palmer's philosophical idea is deeply rooted in his religious beliefs, it still expresses a belief that many people can identify with: it takes a long time to learn one's own self and express that externally in authentic ways. As young adults on the cusp of living independently, my students require some scaffolding about how to think about themselves and their journey moving forward. Unfortunately, the dominant narrative in public education is that students need academic rigor and canonical texts to become successful. As Georgia Heard expertly describes, "The silence that surrounds telling the truth and expressing emotion [in schools] is pervasive" (xx). What would it look like to foster a classroom environment where students were able to tell their truths in an authentic, but not overly vulnerable, way? How would it be possible to measure such a shift? Heard argues that "poetry is one way to shatter" (xx) the silence she describes. Similarly, Arda Culpan describes "Students create their own meaning by making their own discoveries rather than solely receiving direct instruction on prescribed topics" (41). My school has recently decided to adopt a personalized learning framework for all teaching and learning in our institution. Thankfully, this framework offers me a logistical scaffold for making what might have earlier been considered risky, or even subversive, choices in my own pedagogy. In many ways, I've felt that this year of teaching is an opportunity to shake off some of the masks that I've worn as a teacher prior to being able to express my true self in the classroom.

One of my most consistent beliefs as an educator has been that it is important for me to take the same amount of risk as my students – to be as authentic and open as I ask them to be. I argued earlier in this theme that the assignment I've most recently given to students gives them a chance to share their own authentic voice within a scaffolded and safe series of steps. The only two constraints of the assignment are the timeline and the guiding question: "Is decolonization possible?" While student responses so far have been fascinating, I'm going to follow a different path towards understanding this assignment in relation to storytelling. I chose to undertake the assignment itself.

Reflection on Completing the Assignment¹

I was fascinated by the intense ways that I immediately began to draw connections between different ideas and poems I've read before as I began drafting. When I look at the three poems I wrote, I'm struck by the deeply personal voice that emerged, which wasn't what I expected when I started. This theme, which thinks about storytelling as a result of stories, voice, and scaffolding, feels true when I look at the writing I completed. I felt immersed in stories that I've heard and tell as part of my self, as well as deeply connected to my own voice. The scaffolding of different poet's voices in my head as I sought to draft my own writing was surprising to me – not because they were unfamiliar but because they felt so vivid. For example, as I began writing about birth, I immediately felt compelled to read Toi Derricotte's *Natural Birth*, because I remembered some part about counting. I haven't read that book (or even had a copy) since 2011. Although these three poems don't feel like the most polished work I've ever produced, they do feel both authentic and like a story that I have wanted to tell – which I think did get to the heart of the intention of the assignment. I'll be interested to see what students produce in the coming weeks.

¹ To read either before or after.

Commented [AM1]: Hi Jeremy – I pretty radically departed from where I said I was going during my WIP – just a heads up! -Casey

Is decolonization possible?: A brainstorm & poetic representation, following the same guidelines I've provided to students

Brainstorm:

- ✓ Do you think decolonization is possible?

Yes, I want to believe that it is possible to undo the impacts on an emotional and physical scale of colonization, but I am not sure about how long it could possibly take. I'm sometimes sure and sometimes unsure that I could undo even a small portion of the ways colonization impacts our classroom... and feel like I have to constantly evaluate ways that a colonial mindset (especially as a white figure of authority in the classroom) impacts my ways of teaching, knowing, and learning.

- ✓ What medium might you present your opinion in? Why?

I think I'd like to write a poem, since that's a) what I'm most comfortable with and because b) I just finished reading Aracelis Girmay in this class with students and I'm inspired by her work.

- ✓ Which authors could you look at to help you navigate this project?

I'd like to seriously consider the ways Girmay writes the "Estrangements" poems in the final section of *The Black Maria* as a pathway towards describing the loss and trauma of colonization and diaspora.

- ✓ What questions do you need answered to move forward?

What is the greatest loss in our classroom? In my own life? How is that healed?
What am I silent about?

Poetic Representations

Third Estrangement: Language²

i am not/ {myself} in this l language."

- Nayyirah Waheed, "e.n.g.l.i.s.h./ for all of us who are held captive"

Please raise your hand
whichever of you (which and not: whom)
has the answer, I will repeat
myself until one of
you
has it, has found the thing of this
language & killed it (if it is not already
dead) & placed it here,
on the desk. Where is it? The active verb
destroyer of peoples, homes,
stories – in speaking it, you must become
it, you are not you any
more. To be or
not to
be
English.

² Title and first line borrowed from Aracelis Girmay

First Estrangement: Home

*One [teacher] will take home for homework each of the
twenty, the thirty, the forty one.*

- Gwendolyn Brooks, "Children Coming Home"

the more i gave to her, the more she answered me

- Toi Derricotte, *Natural Birth*

"Miss, do you have kids?"

"Do you want them?"

This body I inhabit, thin, white, tall, may
be a future home for a child
or children (twins on my mother's side). I carry this
every day: the future of
possibility, spreading out and contained.

My mother tells me
it's quite common for a woman's
abdominal wall to
separate during labor,
taking months to
heal, to reconnect.

To be a home, to
make a home, to be strong-walled.

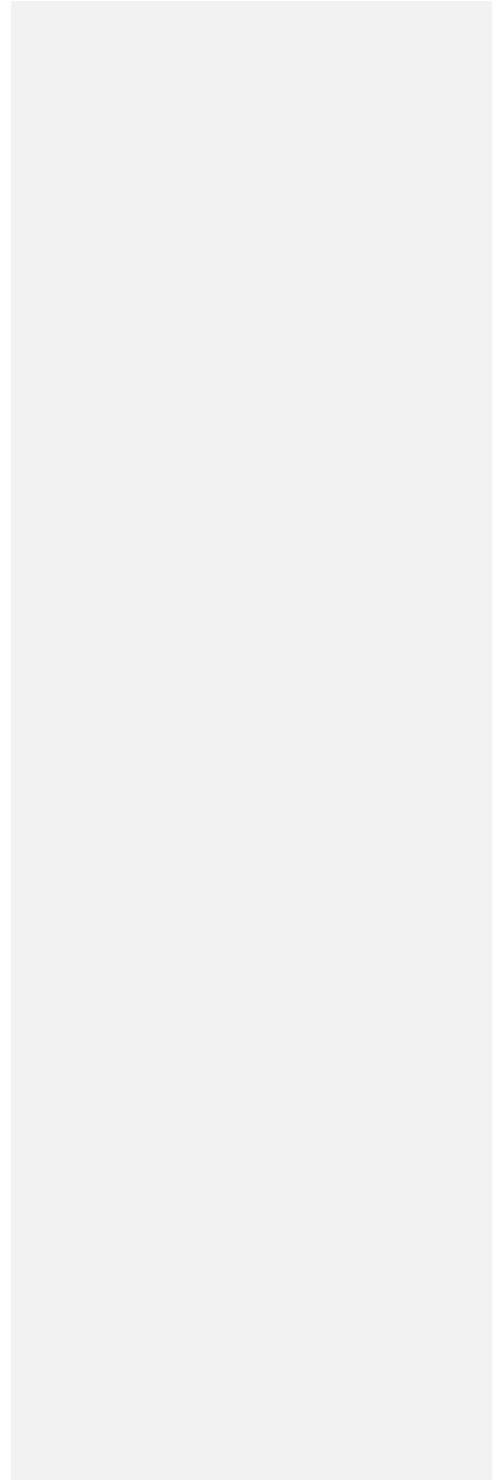
Myette is looking at me, asking,
waiting for class to start, here in this
room which is square in almost every
dimension. A man made this room,
or men, who have no need for circles or
movement or softness. I laugh to Myette,
say, "No," feel deep inside me something
that does not fit here.

(For who wants to
give birth surrounded by hard and linear things?)

A classroom can be home
if I spread out within it;
a class in a room can be home,
when you make
room for the home inside you
it doesn't matter
what the class is called
or how many square tables
(there are 11) or how many
broken tiles
(there are four)
or how many windows (three). There is no
counting what we each

take home
with us from here: the twenty
faces, the thirty
poems,
the forty-one times I said,
“Hi, Myette,”

already this year.



Third Estrangement: Whiteness

but a consequence is thinning me

- Aracelis Girmay, "Third Estrangement, in memory of Jonathan Ferrell"

On Sept. 14, 2013, Mr. Ferrell crashed a car...walked to a nearby home and knocked on the door to ask for help around 2:30 a.m. The woman living there... called the police.

- Christine Hauser for the New York Times

My partner, who is Black and also
a man, was walking once through
the place we live, where he has lived
all his life, and a police officer called
him over, laughing, because no fewer
than four people had called in a bomb

scare, because my partner, who is Black
and also a man, was walking through the
place we live wearing an exercise vest
and his headphone cords are red. And there
I was, laughing with him in the living
room, wanting to cry, for him, but also

for the imagination that is in me, too.
Because one day, when I am pregnant
and at home asleep, will I call the police
when a person knocks at my door, when a
Black person knocks at my door, when
a former student, Black and a man, knocks

at my door, will I become his consequence?
Will my imagination, which spreads out into
eternal whiteness and devastation, thin
out the edge of his personhood, life
line, history?

A vine grows on the tree in our front yard.
One neighbor, a white woman, tells us to
cut it at the root. Now, half of the vine is dying,
half of it is alive.

Today, I imagine every white person as
both halves of the vine: cut at the root
and flourishing. Withering and choking

the life out of something else. Every
day I am looking at my imagination. I am
pulling off the green leaves, but no matter
how large the pile grows, no matter how many
I cast aside, the vine still rises up. Every

day I am looking out the window.

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