

What does SoTL mean to a poet?

a zine

of pedagogical practice poems

veering towards the “poetic inquiry” methodology

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Abstract

In January, I felt resistance towards the independent steps I needed to take to complete the WTFS project. To break through this intellectual block, I journaled. Here are some segments of one entry:

"I entered my WTFS cohort in 2025, a time of extreme political violence. My experience has been colored by this zeitgeist of unrest and inequality... My existential confusion has resulted in falling behind on my SoTL project... I feel I have a grudge against my SoTL project. I write this reflection in an attempt to dissolve hard feelings against a project I must complete...

I experience self-doubt, stereotype threat, and burnout. I'm afraid people will learn how unconventional I am and that it will be a problem...

Summer Institute was composed of discussions that were meaningful, but I still could not figure out where I fit in, and I couldn't even articulate what questions to ask to get there...

Because of the world around us, I spent most of the semester scared and distracted...

I have had thoughts like... 'SoTL is not for poets'... This has led to big questions about belonging... 'Methodology' is not a word I heard in graduate school..."

Somewhere along the way, I found out about poetic inquiry, a qualitative methodology in which the scholar writes “research poems,” based on “found” text and/ or her observations. This methodology happens to have origins in the approach of black lesbian feminist poet and professor Audre Lorde, a writer who is coincidentally one half of my “Major Authors” class along with white Jewish lesbian feminist poet and professor Adrienne Rich.

Lorde writes about how knowledge can come *from* feeling. She writes in *Sister Outsider* that “we need to examine the ways in which our world can be truly different. I am speaking here of the necessity for reassessing the quality of all the aspects of our lives and of our work, and of how we move toward and through them.” This imperative examination is relevant to those of us who teach our students critical thinking because it necessitates practicing critical thinking ourselves.

My WTFS year is part of a larger arc of pedagogical scholarship within my career that will continue. In the future, I hope to take on a more conventional study of student perceptions of ungrading as a feminist pedagogical practice—my original WTFS proposal. For now, I remain in a self-reflective mode that veers towards poetic inquiry. Here are some poems about where my focus has been this year. I am still writing my way towards SoTL. As a poet, this is as far as I got.

Introduction

21 Love Poems

Class has ended

no one's packed their bag

or stood up

our thinking woven into the writing we read

the longest poems of our universe

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I make a joke

I do this anytime I want to distance

from what's really happening

because I'm *feeling* too much happiness

or it is grief

our time's soon over

//

Let's forget everywhere else

we have to be

Let's talk about these poems all day

Introduction, cont.

D.C, Maryland, Virginia

I dreamed the classroom flooded
and our post-WWII steel furniture
stood like a flock of flamingos in brutalism's lake

I dreamed we found a baby bunny nestled in a box
of give-away clothes somewhere in a college town alley
rogue raccoon approaching us trying to fight

I dreamed there was a shooter and everything
happened in slow motion
I dreamed that nothing could kill me

in a dream of green sky with another tornado
I couldn't stop dreaming about email
my mind a screen with cursor drifting to the right

in my dream of a Flintstones car
tires popped off like flying bottle caps
and we had to push to work by foot

students sunk off a fearful grey-shaped ship

but we discovered we were mermaids
in the dream we never stopped breathing

nine years into teaching
I no longer tend to dream
about showing up to class late and unprepared

an imagined co-teacher yelling
“where’s your slideshow?! It’s Monday!”
but I still have lots of dreams where things go wrong

in the midst of impossible,
preposterous situations
which is to say dreams

more authentic to the spirit of anxiety’s terror:
“expect the unexpected”
and “you never know”

like seeing the American flag
folding smaller and smaller
through a wall of windows

at the back of my satellite classroom
in the Chemistry Building

a military funeral carried out

on the grounds of a nearby church below

I steeled myself to ignore it and continue teaching

a prose poem about the DMV

the ceremonial gun salute happened

after class on the first floor

I got myself another coffee to make sure I was awake

Literature Review

White Board Cento

*composed of white board notes
after a discussion of Adrienne Rich's "North American Time"*

Readers expanding the work beyond the writers

Our reckonings as artists

"Verbal privilege" and different ways to use words

Perceptions around privilege, oppression, and power

Empathy and Nella Larsen's novella *Passing*

The poetry of Toi Derricotte

Media geared towards children

Erasure Imagery AI

activism vs. resistance vs. living vs. survival

Who do we make art for?

The world changing underneath us

Self-determination

Reader's projection upon the writer

Art's distance from the author

The risks of being a writer and making art anyway

Personal growth

Outsider experience

Which background do I lean into?

“Peel back” “Values” What is considered “okay”

Dehumanization

Humor and healing

Religion and messages

Unlearning Deconstructing Resilience

Comfort Privilege Oppression

Socially-Lived Theorizing

Methods

Grading Weekend

Midterms: some of the strongest student work
I've ever seen

Zines about the periplum of queer identity

Songs composed and sung for class

Entire novels viewed through the theoretical lens

Illustrations and webcomics

Anti-patriarchy magazine collage

Whole feminist theories invented
with charts and justifications

I'm glad I chose ungrading
because each complete project gets a complete "1 point"

so we can be in feminist conversation

beyond "evaluation"

I can take in the worlds the students are

dreaming into existence

Methods, cont.

Spring Break

On a road trip to Toronto
by myself, I blast Mary J. Blige's "Real Love"
on my sedan's stereo when crossing Michigan
from an album I've listened to for twenty years
and apparently will never grow sick of.

At the Art Gallery of Ontario, I stand with
a smooth marble sculpture of a polar bear
in a metal cage but walk past most of the art
like reading a good book just to forget.

Near the large blurry portrait of a woman,
an array of tiny antique perfume bottles, I'm like
droves of teenagers distracted by anything but the art.

At the museum gift shop, I cannot find a single item
I want. I dip outside to re-envelope myself
in music and think about the last few years,

all the time I could have used for writing or scholarship
that I spent feeling sorry for myself
I haven't found *true love*,

a concept I don't even believe in.

bell hooks reframed “the search for love” as a topic
of scholarly feminist inquiry, also a koan, Audre Lorde’s
“it does not pay to cherish symbols. . waiting to be burned
to life. . we will spade up another plot.”

Adrienne Rich’s “without tenderness, we are in hell.”

Toronto gives me wet snow endless reading
in coffee shops and restaurants and conversations
with strangers like the math professor
who asked my favorite poem
and what a *poet thing*
to say *the one we're living*.

Results

Poetic Thinking

Becoming something different
from the teacher I was
A vocation

I find a method that words for me
Observation

Leaving the conference to see the trees
budding eye-level along the lake

Subversion
in focus of attention

Intuition towards fragmentation
The lake's surface flush with dappled light

//

Become this so I wouldn't do that

My hexagonal thinking activity destined to fail
on a Tuesday yet

English Ed majors in the classroom
rescue us sending a life boat

in the form of gentle suggestion:

take the time to do a “gallery walk”

and it works

Results, cont.

Theater of the Oppressed

One day after spring break, we practice
“Theater of the Oppressed”
invented by Augusto Boal: in the classroom

we make a human sculpture.
The point is to interrogate somatically
structures of oppression

we’ve been discussing all semester.
Three students freeze
in the form of the human sculpture

acting as if they are a family.
A “director” instructs a fourth student to stand motionless
with his arms stretched forward,

a symbol of division, assuming the persona
of an ICE agent. While unmoving,
each delivers an internal monologue, in-character, aloud,

simultaneously, according to the rules.
The “ICE agent” is a deeply kind student

in his thirties, who will debrief about discomfort
embodying evil (my word), how empathy (his word)

was an unexpected requirement for the acting.

The four characters, still frozen in place,
only mouths moving, start speaking in turn,
listening, and begin a dialogue

with each other in-character.

In the final step of the exercise, they un-freeze and move
silently in slow motion, acting out

the rest of the scene, post-dialogic intervention,
the “agent” backing away with his hands up
as the family members move

towards and away from him in space.

We are on shaky ground, I am aware
even while we are doing the acting

because this is real violence
in people’s lives, not a game.

As I am describing this scene on paper,

out of context, maybe it seems insensitive,

maybe it is. *Let us go. Leave us alone.*
And the other student's character
kept saying *I don't have a choice.*

I remembered something real
about harm that day,
that sometimes the person causing harm
believes they have no power to stop.

Discussion

Learning Peace, Teaching Peace

Salah Sarsour and 60,310 other people are jailed in ICE prisons
while we conduct class in Central Wisconsin
and I share an announcement
about a clothing swap and we read Audre Lorde's poem "Power."

It is at an academic conference that I learn more
about some of these concentration camps,
about enforced rules that prisoners cannot put their hands
in their pockets and that the overhead lights never go out.

Salah Sarsour, President of the Islamic Society of Milwaukee,
a man I have never met, in prison, whose organization opened
their doors to me as a non-Muslim teenager
via interfaith iftars, facilitated dialogues, tours of the mosque.

In the early 2000s as Islamophobia grew in this country,
put most simply, the Islamic Society of Milwaukee
taught me as a student about peace through showing
that you can respond to hatred by feeding people.

Salah Sarsour and so many others, here and in other regions,

in prison for being Palestinian. His grandchildren, students in schools.
I'm supposed to teach Adrienne Rich's essay
today about what makes up a poet's education.
I'm supposed to stop thinking about the virtual meeting we had,

open to the public, where I turned my camera off
so no one would see me crying because someone was saying
there is really nothing more to be done to protect our students
and colleagues from ICE. We're supposed to go to school while

Salah Sarsour is in prison.

Discussion, Cont.

That Lesbian Poetry Class

At the edge
of a winter I felt would never end,
a winter where some weeks my job
was what kept me going, a winter
where for weeks, I didn't start
a poem because I could not write
about the queer white poet
shot to death in Minneapolis,
her glovebox full of stuffed animals—
those photos we've all seen—
I felt like I had nothing
to give until 200 students
gathered in our building
for a teach-in because they want
to change the world. At the far end
of this winter, a student approaches
me in the parking lot
just to ask if next semester
we'll be offering "that lesbian poetry class"
because they've heard about it and want to write,
because poets change the world.

Limitations

Professionalism

Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich
were academics, too

This I need to remember
as we talk about structures
of power
and students bring poems
that critique
a topic of their own choosing
and talk frankly about pain

As I move into the weekend
and go to the punk show
where someone approaches me with
“Professor!”
and I go to the protest
where an elder protestor thinks I am a student

and I log onto the zoom lecture on love poems
how each summer I think
“next year I’ll be a better teacher by…”
but it never becomes the right time

It's hard to see oneself
at the limits
where you feel you live multiple selves
in a single day—

Where I feel most myself is on the page
because it is endless
so many things can be true here at once
like sisterhood and time travelling

Conclusion

Diving into the Work

with apologies to Adrienne Rich

First having studied the pedagogical texts
and loaded the flash drive,
and checked the edge of the expense account,
I put on
the outfit of rhetorical analysis
the absurd flippers
a classroom manner of gravity and levity.
I am feeling called to do this
not like Adrienne Rich with her fan-girl team
aboard the lush-lake Ivy League's pontoon
but here at a state school with Gen Z.

There is a tightrope.
The tightrope is always there
pulled across the river
between stake and tree.
We know how long it's been there,
we who have used it, benefitted from
financial aid and mentorship and the unpaid labor
of those who labored unpaid so we could be here.

Otherwise
the tightrope is a circus trick,
some summertime hobby.

I start to cross the river.
High above and still
the blue sky immerses me
like a bucket of clouds
of our human airs.
I cross the river.
My blazer stifles me,
and I run faster across the line
and there is no one to tell me
what will happen when I fall.

First the water is blue
and then it is cold and then
the rough slink of vegetation
underwater it elides the full story
of how I got here and the river
is not a short story
the river is not a question of belonging
I have to learn alone
to rotate my understanding
with the current, to meet the river

where she's at.

And now: it is easy to forget
what I came for
among so many who have always
lived here
swaying their file folders
between the octopus ink xerox machines
and besides
you always forget your lunch at home.

I came to explore the work.
The words are our students.
The words are our own.
I came to see the damage of the banking
model of education
and the liberation that takes place anyway.
I think of a tree
that will be cut down for campus expansion,
philosophically no more permanent than a person
or the school itself.

The reason I came here:
the learning and not the story of the learning
or, the real story of the learning

and not the rubriced myth
the students' faces staring
towards the future or into distraction
evidence of a dysfunctional society
worn by worsening ice storms
and tornado watches, 5:00 am fire alarms
pulled by bullies
in this beautiful, threadbare state
hurtling into the future
of tentative Midwestern professionals.

This is the place.

And I am suddenly here on campus,
the mermaid with an office full of books,
the merman with an equal number of books.
Professors circle silently
about the work
and dive into working across the weekend.
I am learner: I am educator

whose breaking point passed long ago
whose immune system still bears the stress
whose pile of papers I am afraid
lies obscurely in a filing cabinet
half-wedged and left to rot

in our old academic building
where my colleague once found a dusty pack of cigarettes
on the top reaches of a bookshelf
from decades ago
when her predecessor smoked indoors.

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back into another semester
carrying a backpack, an Excedrin,
a book we'd love to teach
written on the inside cover
with our name.

Notes and Sources

These poems are in conversation with the works of Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich, the foci of my “Major Authors” class.

Twenty-five students undertook that journey with me this semester, and I am indebted to them for their insights, their genius, their contributions, their questions, and their willingness to collaborate.

Matthew E. Henry’s *The Colored Page* is a collection of poems that talks honestly about being a teacher. His work is a model for the poems I try to write about teaching. I also write in appreciation of Stacey Waite’s *Teaching Queer* and the poetic inquiry work of Camea Davis.

“Diving into the Work” is a parody that borrows many lines and its form from Rich’s “Diving into the Wreck.”