

“Interconnectedness” Through Daily Writing: Orchardists’ Daughters Tell Their Stories

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LaVona, in Hebrew, means new moon, so kiddush lavona means prayer for the new moon. The Nebraska women who raised me believed that it is good to plant seeds under the new moon. Like Alice Walker, I first learned about growing things from watching my mother and her grandmother, Maggie, plant cheap seeds in a small garden in front of the three-room house where Mother was raised. They knew when to go to buy the seed packets—20 or more for a dollar—pinks, forget-me-nots, zinnias, wishbone flowers, petunias, snapdragons, and phlox. Around Memorial Day, Mother would carry out a low three-legged stool for Great-grandma Maggie to sit on, and Mama and I sat on the ground in the newly cleared weed patch. It was my job to lay down the seed packets in certain spots and keep moving them until the two of them had a perfect plan for planting. Soon the patch of dry land burst into color—every color imaginable—and it looked to me like a miracle, especially since every drop of water that was not rain had to be pumped and carried to water the seedlings by hand. Even today, I wonder how they knew what this garden would look like before one seed was planted. And I still remember that Great-grandma told me her parents, Kansas homesteaders, planted coreopsis and saved the seeds to use inside pillows and mattresses to kill bedbugs.

From the time she was born, Mother practiced gardening with her grandmother, year after year and season after season. Cooley writes that

“practice...is deeply committed to thinking about the interconnectedness of life and life processes (be they biological or socio-cultural)—and the resulting sedimentations that is the artwork in its becoming” (2012, p. 63).

Practice is also a major part of becoming a writer (Boyle, 2016, p. 532). It was through practice that my mother learned to make goat’s cheese, watermelon pickles, butter, and grits. It was through practice that we canned peaches, cut corn off the cob, and picked huckleberries—preserving food for Nebraska winters.

In “Writing and rhetoric and/as posthuman practice,” Boyle defines practice as “the repetitive production of difference even if that difference looks, to our conscious awareness, the same. When we repeatedly undertake the same task, we introduce differences simply by adding another version” (p. 547). She thinks of practice as more “serial” than “reflective” and adds,

“The difference is perceived and affirmed within an ecology, and relations within that ecology become activated in new ways” (p. 547).

In all of my classes, I write with my students almost every day as we begin to see “the interconnectedness of life and life processes” Cooley believes is necessary for growth and development in writers. In the past two years, I have had two graduate students, Adriana Sanchez (2016) and Brenda Aguilar (2016) who have written about their lives and their parents’ work in the orchards in Washington. In our daily writings in graduate seminars, we discovered that we had much in common: growing up in rural areas, seeing our parents working hard in fields and orchards, feeling deep connections to community, leaving those communities to earn college degrees, and engaging in self-translation through the learning process. Often, the daily writing can lead to the discovery of topics for larger projects such as the master’s thesis or even a doctoral dissertation (Morales, 2015). As they interned in my Composition for Multilingual Writers classes, we taught a biography of Eleanor Roosevelt and wrote daily journals focusing on key parts of Eleanor’s life—her bilingualism from birth, the loss of both parents and a brother before the age of ten, her education in a French immersion finishing school in England, her service to the immigrant community on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, her commitment to civil and human rights, and her social activism.

It was during her internship that Brenda followed models I provided, designed lessons based on the biography, shared her journals with our students, and responded to their journals about coming of age celebrations in their countries. This journal prompt and model appear in Brenda’s thesis as Artifact 8—one of 46 artifacts she includes in her autoethnography and bi-literacy narrative.

Journal 2: My Happiest Moment

Quote from Freedman

***“Everything is changed for me now. I am so happy.
Oh! So happy & I love you so dearly.”
Eleanor Roosevelt***

Interpretation

From the moment Eleanor encounters Franklin Roosevelt again, her life takes a completely new path of happiness—a path, where after a couple meetings they both end up having feelings for each other, and soon enough are secretly engaged. The engagement would test out how much they cared for one another since Franklin’s mother thought they were still too young. For Eleanor to have this happen in her life would be the most memorable moment.

Prompt

Describe your happiest moment in life. Who was there? Where did this take place? What was it that made you so happy? Why do you consider this moment the happiest moment you remember?

in life. Moreover, it’s a new beginning to adulthood where one is responsible for her duties at home, is mature, and is ready to make good choices from wrong. The big day arrived, April 30, 2005. After mass, the ceremony transitioned at the Quincy Community Center. The venue was decorated according to the color of my dress, sky blue. Everything was nicely arranged with balloons, stage lights, table decorations, and flower-paper ornaments. Most importantly, was to have the food prepared as the guests arrived. Then came the time for the waltz and father-daughter waltz, respectively, which plays a major role to introduce the beginning of the young adult to the people who are celebrating with her. I recall having to practice constantly to learn the complicated steps the choreographer wanted me to acquire. It drove me crazy. I was thankful for the many gifts I received, but I was more grateful to everyone who was there with me to share this happy moment. I consider my quinceañera, as one of the happiest moments in my life because I learned there was more meaning to this tradition. A quinceañera we can share down to other Mexican-American young girls as a way to remind us of our heritage and whom we can identify within the community.

Brenda Aguilar

Intern’s Journal

When I was young, turning 15 years old was something I needed to think about since most girls have a special tradition called a quinceañera. One is no longer a child, but is transitioning from childhood to adulthood. At that time, I did not know what it meant to have a quinceañera and I did not see a point in having one until my mom talked to me. My mom is a very kindhearted person who has been working all her life. She gets up early to prepare lunch for work, working from 5 A.M. to 4 P.M. in the afternoon. Growing up, she was never around but I knew how much she cared for her family. My mom never had a quinceañera because her parents did not have the money and she was always working to help her family out. Nonetheless, she always told me it was important to value this tradition as a memorable event that happens once in a lifetime. After speaking to my mom and listening to quinceañera stories some of my aunts had, I decided to plan my quinceañera. Usually a quinceañera is supposed to take place close to or on your birthday, but since my birthday is during the winter season, I chose to wait and have my quinceañera during the spring season. A quinceañera includes both a religious and social ceremony as a way to give thanks for getting this far

As Brenda read the students’ journals for the day and responded, she began to see the interconnectedness of the cultures and languages represented in the class, and she learned of the Japanese coming of age ceremony that students had attended when they turned 20.

Adriana Sanchez (2016), noted that she was not asked to write about her life in the orchards until she became a graduate student in TESL, and she was thankful to be given that epistemic space to write about her own life, as she does here in the thesis: After a long hot day’s work, the men were often too tired to head back to the cabins to change out of their work clothes. Sometimes the one who drew the short straw would head straight out. When it was his turn to run errands for everyone, my dad recalls getting unfriendly stares as people sized up his dirty khaki work pants, his flannel button-ups, and work boots (2016, p. 4).

We see the interconnectedness of generations Cooley writes about here as Adriana imagines how hard life must have been for her father, who has worked for the same orchardist for 35 years: Being a minority and not knowing English must have been difficult for my father. When I ask him how he managed to not feel intimidated or scared, he often replies with,

“No había de otra, y el trabajo que hacíamos era honesto. No hay porque avergonzarse. Malo fuera que estuviéramos robando o matando.” (I had no choice, and the work that we did was honest. There was no reason to be ashamed. It would be bad if we were stealing or killing.)

Adriana opens her thesis with a brief history and a photo of herself in her christening gown, explaining that this is one of the few baby photos she has from her birth in Mexico “because poor Mexicans could not afford to own cameras” (p. 1). We talked about how this was true for my family too because we lost everything in a flood, and we were also poor. For the year that Brenda and Adriana worked on the theses with me, we felt that interconnectedness that helped all of us keep writing about where we came from and how we got from there to here—from lives of poverty and hardship to graduate degrees. Adriana, several other students, Brenda, and I presented parts of our current work at the WAESOL Conference (Aguilar, Alshuaibi, Eliason, & Reeves, 2014), and Brenda and Adriana presented their work at the Tri-TESOL Conference in 2015.

I am currently writing a memoir of my mother, and hearing about Brenda’s and Adriana’s mothers’ strength, courage, and hard work has inspired me to continue to write about my mother’s 25 years of working in a chocolate factory at night so she could care for her grandfather during the day. In Washington in 2011, there were 790,000 Hispanics, and their stories are of great interest to all of us teaching English across the state. At the same time, teachers’ literacy narratives bring a thick description of culture that is needed in teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (Anzaldúa, 1987; Canagarajah, 2016, 2012). Adriana and Brenda honor their parents in the heritage language and culture projects they took on to complete the master’s degree. Adriana quoted her father in her title because he told her he had come here with all of his possessions in just a “saltine box” to pursue the American dream, while Brenda names her parents in her title, *I Am From Epifania and Tomas—An Autoethnography and Bi-literacy Narrative of a Mexican American Orchard Workers’ Daughter*. The practice of daily writing with my students has contributed to the interconnectedness needed in a community of writers and language learners. It has made me a better writer and a better teacher.

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