

Writing with the Edge of a Knife

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Abstract: In this piece, I think about the notion of writing dangerously, as in writing in a way that considers what it means to write from the margins. Specifically, I am interested in writing that refuses to seek daddy's penchant and that shifts away from getting swallowed by imposter syndrome. Through snippets of a personal narrative, I share my own experiences with those sites of contention and how I reject writing that prescribes to what someone else wants and what academe accepts and values. In other words, I am departing from conventional and traditional writing, and conceiving writing that emerges outside of the norm. In some manner, I have made a vow to enter that space and to never return. It is in my writing where I put that to work, overcoming my fear of writing and showcasing here what it means to write from the site of the wound.

Keywords: daddy's penchant, imposter syndrome, marginality, writing, writer of colour

A Provocation: Writing from the Margins

'Schizophrenic.' The use of the word—its contour—is polemic. The grammar of which punctures. In fact, it pricks me when it is offered as a piece of feedback to describe my writing style in one of the first pieces I had submitted to an academic journal. Its incision at the time, at least figuratively, murders me. The way it makes me feel inadequate and insufficient in some way such that life jolts itself out of my body. Of course, this is not the first time such a crime scene has occurred. As a graduate student, my writing has been previously described as “contrived” and “more concerned with appearing scholarly.” Remarks that, at first, make me question my writing. I have written elsewhere about this, speaking to my contentions with research and writing (Patel, 2021), and how those experiences have left a mark on me. But, here, I am not concerned with (re)visiting an aching archive. Instead, I am scripting the ways in which I come to writing as a contemporary and emerging scholar, and I write at the [heart] beat of my pulse. In that passage, I refuse to be injured by some careless words, and, like hooks (2015), “I let no one dissuade me from my dream of becoming a writer” (p. 11). And hence my writing continues...

My writing, of course, is intricately connected to my body, which is sutured in Brownness. For a while now, I have been thinking about what this means, what it means to be a writer of colour who confronts the dynamics of race and racism, especially from a vantage of lived experiences through a raced body. My writing straddles that complexity and nuance, as I try to write in what Anzaldúa (2009) calls a quest for the self, trying to make sense of what has happened to me through theory (hooks, 1991). A journey that is entangled as my writing is caught in the crossfire of a body contending and grappling with what it means to be Brown and to live in a world that does not want me. As a writer of colour, I attempt to work within that gap (Palulis, 2009). I am interested, as such, in the margins as a site for writing, where I work through what Menakem (2017) calls racial trauma, as well as the awe and reverence (Morrison, 1998). I suppose, like Leggo (2004), “I am an interpreter who stands between the chaos of experiences and the production of a tidy narrative that represents the experience” (p. 105). Gripped by the profoundness of that offering, I come to writing in a new life, and I trace the words that have given me sustenance as a writer, who sits at the site of marginality and its multitude(s).

On Daddy's Penchant: Building Your Own Home

My writing has not always been without its provocations. As a student, and this is an observation I have also made as an elementary school teacher and as a teaching assistant, the act of writing often involves seeking daddy's penchant—a term that I take from Tuck and Yang (2014). In this context, I define it as a desire for approval and validation from someone in a position of power: a professor or a supervisor, for example. When this becomes so inculcated over the years, students like me obsess over that approval, whether in the form of a grade or feedback, such that the very nature of writing loses its appeal. It becomes rudimentary. An enervating task, even. Another boring chore in the confines of academe and its unrelenting demands. This emerges at an early age, where we come to view writing as something you do for someone else, usually a parent at first and then a teacher. And if that teacher, as a point of authority, declares that “English must not be broken” (Low and Palulis, 2006, p. 51) then writing can become debilitating. We lose our minds over conventions, grammar, and spelling, as well as being ravaged by rubrics and standards. But, more dangerously, writing becomes a terror—the terror of bearing the consequences of not meeting daddy's (or the master's) expectations, whose authority is always lurking, even if it is not ostensibly so. In that constriction, many of us come to fear writing. Afraid, so to speak, of writing outside the frame of what is authorized. Struggling with this myself, I am drawn to the work of Gingrich-Philbrook (2005) on autoethnography, who contends that daddy does not budge

and warns that one should not “justify the presence of the self in writing to the patriarchal council of self-satisfied social scientists” (p. 311). I concur with this, but it seems easier said than done.

In making sense of this, not only am I wanting to take a detour from the kind of writing academe accepts and wants, but I also want to depart from writing that prescribes to the dominant paradigm, as Shawl and Ward (2005) take up in their work and broadly define “as what the majority of people in our society would call normal” (p. 3). For me, writing that is ‘normal’ coheres to whiteness, and attaches itself to knowledges that are deemed to fit Eurocentrism and Westernization. Seeking out writing that challenges said dominance, I am contaminated by Simpson’s (2007) work on ethnographic refusal. This stance to outright decline something captures my attention. In my own writing, I am specifically thinking with Rodríguez (2019) about refusing “containment narratives” that are ascribed to the other. The word *refusal* takes on a spectral life in my writing, haunting me. An uncanny, but a welcome companion. A few months after being enthralled by this prospect, another gift arrives, as I go to-and-fro between this act of refusal and the trepidation of disobeying the gatekeeper(s) of academia. Something that changes me. I listen to Zebian (2021):

The biggest mistake we make is that we build our homes in other people. We build those homes and we decorate them with the love and respect that makes us feel safe at the end of the day. We invest in other people, and we evaluate our self-worth based on how much those homes welcome... When those people walk away, those homes walk away with them, and all of a sudden, we feel empty because everything that we had within us, we put into them. (p. 17)

These words reach me at the start of my graduate studies, and at a time when the word *rejected* becomes a frequent visitor. The message of “I’m afraid we will have to reject the opportunity to publish” becoming a familiar phenomenon. A sentence that weighs me down. With this as the backdrop, something about Zebian’s (2021) words grips me, such that her words come as an imposition and remain with me (hooks, 1994). Dare I say, they are almost prophetic, as my writing starts to cohere to the edges of the above passage, departing from writing that seeks approval and more interested in a project of building my own home. A home that works in tandem with the notion of refusal; that is, saying no to intruders—to those who seek to colonize. This is still, of course, a work-in-progress. *Quelque chose en cours*.

I am now adamant about the revelation that writing must be first and foremost written for oneself—for the soul. I am drawn to Anzaldúa (2009) who refers to writing as “the act of making soul, alchemy” (p. 30). My pulse guides me: blood stained on the parchment. Spivak (1992) is correct: “Autobiography is a wound where the blood of history does not dry” (p. 795). I also take from Derrida (1976) to situate my writing as natural, connected to my breath and my voice. What he refers to as pneumatological. When I write this way, when I write for myself, and not from the desire to build a home in someone else, I am intoxicated. Drunk on the idea that I am free at will to write, to write in a way that is uninhibited. I find myself flowing with rhythm. The chaos becomes clear, and the words come together. In that waltz, I am writing for various versions of myself. I write, for example, to my former self, the brown boy dreaming, who is waiting for an anthem that exalts Brownness. I am writing a love letter to him, to myself from years ago, and it seems necessary to make up for the lost time. Sometimes, I listen to the young, suffering child that I learn about from Thich Nhat Hanh (2006). I take his words to heart and try not to suppress the ache. I tend to it because it also requires attention. I engage in the mechanics of attending to the wound: exhuming, listening, questioning, (re)storying, and (re)worlding. In another piece, I have attended to this act in more detail — the notion of writing as healing specifically (Patel, 2022), allowing me to confront what it means to be marginalized and to live at the margins.

I should note, however, that writing about marginality, specifically about grief, does not always mean I am damaged or even damaging myself. I am learning from Anzaldúa (2009) that “to write about an experience that’s been painful, there’s a wound, and it’s got a scab. To write I have to peel that scab off, get back into the pain and the blood” (p. 196). A wound takes care and time. The wrapping of the cloth, as well as the antiseptic and gauze that come before, requires attention. The bloodier the gash, the longer the procedure. If it is perennial like a life-long disease or like an infection that spreads then the process is never-ending. I must learn to live with the grief and build a home that shrouds its presence, knowing that it can never go away, but also knowing that it can be made into a small part of the shelter(ed) space. At least, that is true for me. Whatever grief work that I am doing, building a home through it, I always return to Palulis (2009), who reminds me to do this work where the wound resides. Not to depart from the site of the ache, but to plunge into its depths. Here, I am not just talking about confronting the young, suffering child. I am nurturing it. I turn to Thich Nhat Hanh because his work is profound on this. He writes, “Without mud there cannot be any lotus flowers” (p. 32). I enter writing to take a mud bath. It is in that ritual, if I can call it that, where something happens.

Transcendence. The terra of the muddy swamp takes over. It is not ethereal in any way, however. Rather, I would claim it to be a meeting place of ontology and epistemology, where dirt settles, takes place, and becomes a ground for my writing.

As such, there is a philosophy in building a home and writing at the same time. I think one lends itself to another. Writing can rescue (hooks, 2013), paving the way to knowledge(s) of Brownness that is/are profound. I am thinking here with Gaztambide-Fernández and Murad (2011) about becoming more burnt, more Brown. A way of conceptualizing Brown skin that is not as something which envelopes the body, but as the tapestry that holds it together. The very foundation of which is ontological, asking questions that get to the roots. What it means to be Brown, for example. I am also thinking about writing as an epistemological pursuit. A search that is not always undemanding. Almeida (2015) explains, “the subaltern body is socially, politically and racially marginalized so that they can never express their ways of knowing and reasoning without being ‘Othered,’ oppressed and repressed, across time and space” (p. 81). My writing seeks to work in those trenches, drifting in words that refuse to be contained. There are consequences to this, for sure. Murmurs, for example. Other things as well: appearing to be unscholarly (I thought I was appearing to be the opposite), the repudiation of race-based epistemologies, or even the reminder of becoming unhireable in the future. At this point, those threats are empty. Gingrich-Philbrook’s (2005) caution that daddy usually does not budge comes back to me. Thus, I have been recently divorced from that fantasy, and I want to keep it that way.

On Imposter Syndrome: Moving to Intimate Desires

As a graduate student, I started a student-run journal called *Counter-Narratives*. The journal seeks to create a space for students of colour to submit a piece of writing for publication, working towards their academic and scholarly pursuits. Through that experience, I have observed the hesitancy that has been expressed by my peers around their writing. There is a concern that they cannot write. It is a feeling that is all too familiar to me. With Anzaldúa (2009), I too, have asked, “Why does writing seem so unnatural for me?” (p. 27). This question settles at the depths of the following matter: imposter syndrome. I have thought about my writing, as well as my early trajectory as a graduate student, and I have had intense feelings of doubt. As Chakraverty (2020) reveals, I had echoed sentiments of feeling like a ‘worthless piece of shit’ or thinking that my writing is ‘shitty’. This happened to be particularly heightened when I compared myself to other graduate students, where I had measured myself to their accolades, many of them in their 20s and some of them already at the stages of their doctorate. The pain from that had been so terrifying that I would spend days, sometimes weeks, wondering whether I could go on and carve out my own space among those more ahead of me. I started to feel confused; my thoughts begin to become scattered much like the way my writing is described at the very beginning. The word ‘schizophrenic’ coming back to me, coming to hunt me down, provoking me, laced with disrespect, insensitivity, and mockery...and all of that ate me alive.

It is not just the personal feeling of doubt that I live with, I must also come to terms with how demanding and difficult it is to pull myself out of that hellhole. Against that chore, Danticat (2010) reminds me of the following: “As immigrant artists for whom so much has been sacrificed, so many dreams have been deferred, we already doubt so much” (p. 19). I am swallowed by history. A [colonial] history that plunges me into the depths of not only self-doubt but of guilt. Why me? What makes it so that I am the one here? These questions track me down. Questions that especially hound me when I engage in the act of writing. I often think I am, borrowing the words of Danticat (2010), an accident of literacy. Simply put, I believe that I am writing by coincidence because no one else in my immediate kinship has engaged in writing as an academic and scholarly pursuit. A premise that is also filled with tribulations: disappointment and worry, for example. Perhaps it has something to do with the trope of being the first, the first to penetrate the halls of academe. How can I look back and tell everyone that I am a failure? Or that I have reservations? This looking back, the very access to breaking down, does not exist for me and for many of us who are marginalized. There are eyes that are glimmering in hope for our future(s). The last thing we want to do is stab those eyes with our own troubles.

Writing is one place where I can put this pain into words, but the notion of the imposter phenomenon continues to be heightened when it comes to writing about the self, writing the autobiographical. I am told that narratives and stories are not research. I hear whispers of the personal as being weak, fuelled by the rancour of traditionalism. This does not thrill me, nor do I agree, so I heed the words of Mishra Tarc (2020) and “leave the work of scholars who write without feeling, divorced from the words they write” (p. 35). Taking a turn of departure, I like to think of myself as someone who breaks the rules. Refuses to be contained. I happen to come back to this notion of transgression when

I am working on my master's thesis. At first, I am bored by the burden of having to write a literature review. I am frightened by having to choose a theoretical framework and then work with it. I am also drowning in the thought that a personal narrative is not enough in comparison to undertaking a more extensive methodology. Borrowing from Chakraverty (2020), I had this belief that others were doing more important research. I was fortunate, however, to have supervisors and committee members who encouraged me to write in my own way. By this point, I had already been building my own home that writing a traditional thesis did not rouse me in any way. I had taken a stance and I was prepared to defend it to the pits of hell (dramatic, I know), and I regret none of it.

While I have been fortunate to not receive pushback for writing in a creative or literary manner, or even writing in a way that transgresses, I have heard the horrors that some of my peers have experienced. They are met with pushback about their style of writing or their yearning to include narratives that speak about race and racism. Here, hooks (2015) reminds me that this denial is part of the broader project of political repression that seeks to erase or silence marginalized realities. I have said this before, and I will say it again, white people can say "water is wet" and be applauded for it (Patel, 2021). I have seen rooms filled with white bodies snapping their fingers at a white author who has returned from a trip to South Asia with some newfound appreciation for life. For those of us who speak about our (home)lands, and when we critique something like colonialism or racism, the snapping comes to a halt. You see, the grief is welcomed with an audible gasp—a sort of shock that is uttered in approval—until that very grief is attached to something, something that white people do not want to talk about. It becomes clear here that the imposter syndrome loiters, lurks in the shadows, but overcoming it does not mean acceptance or validation. Remember: daddy does not care. So, instead of attuning writing to what some purveyor(s) of academia want(s), I resist that temptation. Sure, the neoliberal clutches of academe are quite seductive, but all of that can only last so long. Again, remember: approval and validation are not forever. They can be easily taken away.

This is why, to write dangerously, I think reading is so important. Reading provides will. It gives more than a nod or permission. It gives relation. When I read, I feel I am in a conversation that I have been long waiting for. I would go as far as to say that somewhere in the pages of a book, where a string of words come together, powerfully stitched to strike a chord, the reader is transported into another world, into a new way of being and thinking, and maybe even believing. In that imaginative space, there is no point of return. What has been read cannot be undone. As Brand (2002) contends, books have a way of leaving gestures in the body. Those gestures often give me something to work with. Reading, for me, also shows me how writing can be possible. So, I agree with Freire (1983) when he says that reading and writing are inseparable. I can get easily lost in words and then come out drenched in words of my own, waiting to be written in some form of poetry or prose. Is that what Freire (1983) meant when he speaks about making worlds out of words?

I return to the conversation about writing my master's thesis to support this point. As I began writing it, I felt withdrawn. I was looking into the past and did not feel remotely interested in the topic even though I had decided on the research question almost two years ago. But when I had to put my research into words I was running into a problem. I had spent days trying to come up with a sentence, but I could only stare at an empty page. When I could no longer find any words, I started to read. It is something I do when I am stuck at an impasse. Sara Ahmed is someone whose work lifts me from the depths of despair when writing. My writing style, as is probably evident here, is very different from hers, but her work always seems to move me (in a good way). I think of it like the way Nawal El Saadawi's writing has been described, having the capacity to shock. Indeed, it leaves a gesture. Ahmed's work is similar. It challenges me. Reading her work on whiteness as an orientation (Ahmed, 2007) had given me a framing for my own thesis. I found myself clinging to her every word, as her discussion of white spaces spoke to what I wanted to convey in my thesis. When I read her work, I am enthralled by the sentences that come one after another, but sometimes, it comes from a particular word. I say this with admiration: she has a way of taking a word, like the word "arrival," and giving it a life that it had not known before. A word for me that is given a different meaning and has given me a life vest for my thesis writing. There is something eerie about how this happens, how reading resurrects my writing, and I like it so much that I keep coming back for more. I admit I am a hedonist in that way.

Indeed, we work on dangerous grounds. Our writing is never safe. Therefore, when I write, I want to do so with volition to write for others, so that there is more out there for people like me, Brown people, to read. Narratives that speak to our pulse, knowing full well the writing machine has traditionally chewed and spit out our stories with the smell of blood and only left us to bleed. I suppose I want to make interventions through my writing like Mohanty (2003). I want to make a dent in the space, and I want others to feel that dent. Of course, as I have expressed earlier, I write for myself, but there is always a double act. Manguel (1996) reminds me that the very act of writing, at its first

incision, in fact, irrevocably creates a reader. I find this horrifying at first because writing, especially from a place of intimacy, is intrusive. Listen here to Anzaldúa (2009):

Writing is like spreading your legs. People are going to come in. They're going to enter your orifices. When you read me you're coming into me. (p. 196)

Those of us who are bashful might find this discomforting, but it is in the place of intimate writing that I find the soul is found, and where others are given a life vest to reach the shore. It has taken me years to recognize the substance of this. Only now do Danticat's (2010) words make more sense to me: "[C]reate dangerously, for people who read dangerously. This is what I've always thought it meant to be a writer. Writing, knowing in part that no matter how trivial your words may seem, someday, somewhere, someone may risk his or her life to read them" (p.10). With these words, I feel comforted and start to see the importance of my writing. I am learning that my narratives are necessary...aware that the blood is there in my veins, waiting. Time to spill that ink onto paper.

Parting Words: Writing Dangerously

I am not sure if all of this categorically makes me a Brown writer or a writer of colour. Perhaps writing *while* Brown is more apt, as my Brownness cannot be separated from my very pulse—its tempo always guides me. I do not want to be too concerned, however, with categories and points of identification. Instead, I think Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) puts it well: "To write is to become" (p. 18). So, I am less concerned about being something and more interested in being and becoming through writing. As I have confessed, it has taken me time to acknowledge this, especially to refuse daddy's expectations and overcome the imposter syndrome. For a long time, I had been writing to seek approval and validation. I did not enjoy the act of writing. I had to get away from it all knowing that it drove me to the brink of despair. Running [away] from that, I am embracing the necessity of writing from the wound, working away at the many layers of me. I am like hooks (2000) in that I find I am in a space of transgression when I am entangled with words. While that journey has been long, almost scathing at times, I am unperturbed by those who find my writing chaotic and messy. I am like Mishra Tarc (2020) in that way, writing brokenly and in the pursuit of a story in pieces — my story. Nothing can keep me from that. I will continue writing dangerously, and so should you.

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