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RHYTHMS

# Writing in Times of Urgency

Edited by  
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RHYTHMS chronicles a  
community of scholars — our  
vibrations arising through texts  
and conversations, in the flows  
of shared space and departure,  
making each other and ourselves  
to an uncommon beat.

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*Art Bamford*

# This Is Not How the World Ends

*This is not how the world ends.*

I read this mantra in a comic book years ago. Whenever the story's non-superpowered protagonist faced seemingly insurmountable odds, catastrophic loss, and certain doom he would very calmly and resolutely repeat it to himself, "this is not how the world ends," before saving the proverbial day.

When I began grad school (a lifetime ago), I affixed this ironically optimistic slogan to the wall above my desk. It served as a helpful reminder to persevere, and as a promise that there would be life after deadlines.

But more recently this phrase has felt somehow disingenuous.

As I look at our current media ecosystem, an abyss of attention-shattering banality, a hatchery of hatred, in which we perpetually feed, inundated by streams of everything all at once. At some point we stopped being people and devolved into *users*. All

our varied forms of expression — our ideas, experiences, joys, sorrows, non-sequiturs, et al.— have been reduced to *content*. The only unifying force hiding behind all these otherwise faceless, addictive-by-design, platforms is a shared business model in which our time is their money. And yet our consenting, collective, slavish devotion to these digital wastelands persists. Maybe this is how the world ends.

Or I think about higher education, a once hallowed hallmark of society's advancement, ingenuity, and enlightenment, slowly crumbling beneath the weight of so many performance metrics. At some point scholars stopped being called to the noble vocation of illuminating curious minds and equipping them with the intellectual tools to contribute well to our shared future. Instead, we so-called intellectuals find ourselves perpetually broke and spiritually broken, crushed by a big buffoonish, blundering bureaucratic apparatus. And as junior scholars search for second and third jobs to keep the lights on, administrators are handing each other six-figure salaries. For what? Well, they raise capital to build buildings to up the enrollment to increase the tuition revenue that pays the six-figure salaries they get to fundraise to build buildings to up the enrollment, to increase the tuition revenue. So our students graduate under abject amounts of debt having received an adjunct's bare minimum in return, albeit in brand new state-of-the-art facilities. Maybe this is how the world ends.

So what about politics? A question which neatly encapsulates the full extent of our current political discourse. The default response to every provoca-

tion, every aggrandizement, every damning piece of evidence is either “so what?” or “what about . . .” How productive. And with every fresh outrage one side doubles down harder while the other grows more wearily indignant. We keep thoughts-and-prayers-ing for something to give, to propel us up off the ropes to knock out this looming threat of authoritarian fascism once and for all. But the longer we stick to this rope-a-dope strategy, the more stuck we become defending a precious little piece of moral high ground. The least scrupulous, most greedy grifters among us just keep jabbing and punching and jabbing and punching and punching and punching just long enough, and jab jabbing, to sap the well-intentioned of their remaining resolve and will to action. Maybe this is how the world ends.

Then there is religion. More specifically, Protestant Christianity, which is the subject of my own research. For American Protestants, the perennial shock of the present has always been how the world ends. From John Winthrop’s Puritan jeremiad onward evangelicals, née Protestants, have confronted each new phase of America’s relentless evolution with fear, trembling, and fundraisers. But this fresh apocalypse feels different — it is more of a parody than a revival. The sermon title is “God in the Hands of an Angry Mob.” The hymn begins, “On Capitol Hill far away, stood an old rugged cross, an emblem of sedition and shame.” The prophet proclaims: “I have a dream that one day our children will not judge others by the content of their character but by the cable news they skim.” Evangelicalism, as a sub-culture, has always been an exercise in parody; a Faustian bargaining

between moral authority and mainstream relevance. But at some point the moral artifice crumbled and the mainstream appeal got left behind. The only creature now here below is the First Fascist Megachurch of Mammon U.S.A., Inc.<sup>TM</sup> Love thy neighbor? They want power. That earthly, capital accumulating, other oppressing, book burning, open-carry kind of power. Maybe this is how the world ends.

Needless to say, this lament could continue ad nauseum. Here we sit in perhaps the wealthiest, most scientifically and technologically advanced society that has ever existed and suicide is the leading cause of death among young adults. Addiction, anxiety, isolation, loneliness, and depression are all spiking above and beyond any previous peak. Each week there seems to be a fresh wave of unstoppable fires, or bigger-than-biblical floods, or some other mass casualty causing disaster that rushes in to remind us of climate change's steady acceleration, and our impending extinction if we don't do something about it. Again and again and again, maybe this truly is how the world ends.

No.

This is not how the world ends.

To me, this phrase has become a Pavlovian cue to take a deep breath, and return to writing. A reminder that the best way to think about your writing, as a mentor once told me, is to not think about it. Just start writing. I don't know how or when or why the world may begin to turn a corner but I do know, and trust with unnerving certainty, that words are the tiny rudder of this big ship we're on. Words hold tremendous power. Worlds are made by words. Change begins with words.



Declarations of intent, admissions of powerlessness, quixotic visions of an improbable yet possible world, these are just simple words we conjure into existence and prune edit by edit, all so that the thing we can't not say may eventually blossom into an essential little footnote within the much larger epic poem in which we are a part. Our as-of-yet unwritten future will emerge like words; once upon a time formed in our hearts and formulated by our minds, then finally stuttered out into being, misspelled, misspoken, and unmistakably sincere. Sure, we are hard-pressed by the urgency of now. We face seemingly insurmountable odds, catastrophic loss, and almost certain doom. But please remember dear reader, this is *not* how the world ends.

*Nabil Echchaibi*

# I Want to Write about It All

I invoke words to save me from words others have spun for me. I write to be alive again because the world insists on caging me. I am much more than the scripts others feel authorized to write about me.

Writing to me is a visceral affair, a haunting of freedoms and enclosures, of suspended thoughts and liberating ideas, and an obsessive desire to remember the debris of my history. What have you done to my body, to my memory, and to the words I could have used to heal the perpetual enfolding of my life as mere reaction, an anguished response to someone else's unfair interrogation? I am not an ending, indeed. I am, as Frantz Fanon would say, "an absolute intensity of beginning," but your images and narratives have already fixed me. My Arabness and Muslimness are tainted words in your imaginary and my role is condemned to rectify your vocabulary. "I am a master and I am advised to adopt the humility of the cripple," Fanon said. I feel a passionate affinity with Fanon because, like

him, I reject this amputation and I yearn for my writing to be alive and totally free.

This brief reflection is a plea by an Arab Muslim suspended between the here and there, the for and against, who yearns to speak, narrate, and breathe in the tussle of ordinariness and aliveness.

I ask: is there more to me than just the compulsion to represent, the incitement to speak and write back, the interpellation to perform and conform?

“Imagine a world of Muslimness”: This is not just a statement but a provocation to imagine another way of being, of living, of dwelling in the world that is not chained to the political, social, and racial prerogatives of our times.

I borrow this plea from Kevin Quashie who writes on the quiet of Blackness, the interiority of Black subjectivity that does not scream representation, revelation, or resistance.

Quashie meditates on the sovereignty of the quiet beyond the expectation of loudness, of the publicness of Black resistance, and the conscriptions of race and violence that punctuate the way we invoke Black subjectivity as inevitably consigned to a conflict with whiteness.

Many Muslims live this doubleness of subjectivity and experience it as a pathology, a script of fractured consciousness that is almost always commanded by a public discourse of the Muslim threat, the Muslim secrecy which necessitates compulsory transparency. The Muslim must be figured out or they must explain themselves.

Highlighting the quiet, the aliveness of Muslimness is not a naïve escape, nor is it a dismissal of the powerful frames that govern our visibility and

agency in the world. Far from it, this is a powerful refusal to consent to this convocation, to this dehumanizing form of address where writing feels like an incitement, a labor of difficult emotions, and a spectacle of anger.

When I write I feel like I'm standing on a sword's edge. I'm on the precipice because the world expects me to perform an identity based on the sound of my name, the geographic location I hail from, and the languages I use as a foreign tongue.

I am detected now and I must live between the blackmail of that detection and the fleeting freedom of being myself. Is there not another outcome for this encounter? I am exhausted. We are all exhausted!

What else is there to Muslimness beyond the struggle of politics, culture, and religious orthodoxy?

What do Muslims want from us?

Fanon asked that question about Black people, colonized people and his answer was crisp and simple: we just want the right to demand human behavior from the other, to be freed from this race talk.

Terror talk is the race talk of today. As Sohail Daulatzai says, "To say there is a Muslim — a thing, an object rendered as manipulable — is to create a figure, a ghost, a lie. Terror talk is the race talk — the 'terrorist' (or the 'militant' or the 'radical') is the twenty-first century way of saying 'savage.'"

Muslim lives matter is not a slogan to compete with the powerful insistence on Black lives mattering. Muslim lives matter because death, torture, drone strikes, detention, surveillance, dictatorship,

dehumanization, and exploitation haunt us, chase us every day.

We matter because we often exist in this liminal space where we feel compelled to return the gaze, where our labor is surveilled, incited, and monitored by epistemic and geopolitical checkpoints.

We matter because we exist in chains.

I grew up in Morocco reading Albert Camus' *The Stranger* as a model of grand literature without questioning the obvious elision of the murdered Arab at the heart of a disparaging account by a Frenchman born and raised in Algeria. That "detail" of the unnamed Arab killed on the beach by the narrator Meursault looms large now as I recall our oblivion at the time that we were merely used as a philosophical prop in a European narrative.

Our screens were invaded by similar narratives of degraded Arabs and Muslims who had to be humiliated and subdued to make way for the noble triumph of the American hero. Hollywood blockbusters and news headlines blended into a clutter of demeaning clichés that made Islam and Muslims the textbook definition of terrorism and religious fundamentalism. As Edward Said would say, Islam was made to mean "nothing but trouble."

*Some write and think*

*Others only write and think back*

*Some live the pain*

*Others only think about the pain*

How much longer should we be consumed by this alienating instinct to reply and return the gaze?  
How much more shall we remain inhabited by this

need to speak in relation to a speech that did not originate with us?

When can we rest the white man in Edward Said's mind? as Hamid Dabashi, writing about the Arab uprising of 2010 and 2011 would remind us.

The subaltern speaks, as Fred Moten says, but their speech is fugitive, untraceable, intangible. We can speak but not always in a way that is legible, recognized, or predictable.

I write these lines as a wounded subject of a relentless matrix of coloniality who refuses to be an emblem, a representative of a faith, a spokesperson of a vast world of 1.5 billion people.

*I just want to be a subject.*

*I do not wish for my writing to dictate, for my theorizing to legislate, or for my words to correct the record.*

*I just want to write.*

I want my writing to sound like something. I want to be opaque. I want my opacity not to be mistaken for deception.

I have been obsessed recently with a digital archive of the Arab Image Foundation, a physical and digital collection of over 500,000 photographic objects and documents from and related to the Middle East, North Africa and the Arab diaspora assembled over the last 25 years by artists and researchers and through donations.

The archive captures other habits and rhythms of Arab and Muslim life. The quiet and the mundane in these portrait photographs signal a different expressiveness of that life, a tonality that evades

the crude politics of representation and disarms the incitement to normative visibility. A collection of images of Palestinian life pre-1948, for example, provides a unique historical document and a powerful glimpse into Palestinian life *without* the occupation.

More importantly, the quiet tonality of these photographs is not legible in a narrow discourse of resistance or response overwhelmingly assigned by an aesthetic of publicity and transparency. It is a quiet form of photography that emits a loud hum of freedom.

I would like to write about opaque Muslims who do not perform to prove something, who do not caricature themselves to represent ...

I wish to write about and with Muslims who do not wear masks, or feel the need to mask up to play a game of signification with rules they did not author nor authorized ...

I long to write about a wild Muslimness that is quiet but expressive, loud but not noisy, present yet not rendered legible by the compulsory logics of publicness and that is opaque without having to justify its opacity ...

Muslimness exist between fullness and impoverishment, between beauty and dehumanization.

*I want to write about it all.*

## Why I Write

I write because long ago I discovered that it was a way of experiencing, expressing, documenting, remembering, noticing.

And I drifted into a career that depended on writing and that cultivated certain practices of writing, and that cultivated in me a sense that writing mattered. It challenged me, trained me, sanctioned me, and to an extent rewarded me for certain practices of writing. By this I mean that there are disciplinary standards and expectations of writing — what we might call “academic writing” — but also that things such as creative writing were not really condoned. The disciplinary standards of writing of course have both conventions of form and location (i.e., only certain “places”) and conventions of content.

At the same time I now see that I have always written because I had to and have to. I can’t do anything else. It beckons me with the promise that it should and might make a difference, both for me, and for ... who? In some ways I don’t know .... Who



do we write for? I guess in the first instance, for ourselves. How could it be authentic otherwise? But then, who do we have in mind as readers when we write?

But what I do know is that the times — that is the past seven or so years — have forcefully demanded new things of me. Many of the received conditions of academic practice have been thrown into turmoil in a time when the whole enlightenment project is under such stress and scrutiny. I'm realizing now how important (and unexamined) a condition of academic practice that is and was during my training.

Not least among these demands of the times is a sense that the moral core of what I do as a person and as a professional is more important than at any other point in my life. I had taken that for granted, but now I cannot. Much of what I assumed, what I took for granted, now needs to be rethought and I must reposition. It seems a bit self-important (but we scholars are conditioned to think of ourselves in this way) but I find now that the work I have always been drawn to — since even before I decided to pursue an academic career — is now of vital importance to contemporary culture and politics.

And so that is back to writing. That essential, or existential function of writing (with which I began above) is the way I know best to achieve that re-positioning, that re-thinking.

So, when I write I write as a person, but I cannot escape the challenge to also write as a scholar and as a teacher, and as a mentor and — most importantly maybe — as a questioner. I do imagine that this writing might well be “trouble” in some ways and in some places. I can't limit my writing to only

that which is acceptable to my institution, to my friends, to my community. It must on some fundamental level be true, true both to myself and to what I understand to be the necessary critical engagements and locations that brings my writing to a place where it means something.

But, I think, the practice and discipline and fact of writing itself needs to be positioned. Because words, the crafting words, the power and potential cruelty of language — the political economy of language and words and writing, are part of what needs to be positioned and centered, and looked at critically, so beyond the writing, there is also a task of creatively — and often in media beyond the linear written word — positioning, considering and qualifying the practice of writing.

*Jaime Lee Kirtz*

## On Not Writing

I don't write.

I don't write but I am constantly writing.

I am writing emails, writing lectures,  
writing applications,  
writing in documents, writing on tax forms  
and rental leases,  
writing messages to friends, acquaintances,  
and family in  
chats and texts punctuated by ellipses ...

I am always busy writing but I don't write.

I don't write, but I have been broken by writing.

I am broken by the writing of rejections,  
writing of denials,  
writing of harmful and hurtful speech,  
writing that  
included me, writing that purposely  
excluded me.

Writing has control over me and yet I don't write.

There is no end to words that flow around me and yet my body is marked by dashes and empty space. I keep waiting for the right kind of writing, the right kind of words, but they never manifest into anything other than unfulfilled gestures and pauses, caught between what I try to say and what I know.

I don't write, at least not anymore. I am not sure I ever wrote. I only have a feeling that maybe I wrote once but I can't tell if it is a memory or something I imagined in order to motivate myself.

Maybe I can write, but I don't write,  
not really,  
not anymore.

*Nandi Pointer*

## The Urgency of Quiet

*It was a warm, summer night in June*

*Jasper, Texas*

*1998*

*It was predawn, pretty late, when James Byrd Jr. decided  
to walk home*

*A blue-grey pick-up truck pulled to the side, there were  
three white men, inside*

*They offered him a ride*

*And one of 'em looked kinda familiar, someone he knew  
from around town*

*Byrd kindly accepted the ride.*

**“Truck n Chains”**

written by Nandi & Shegun Pointer

These words comprise the introduction to “Truck n Chains,” a song my brother and I wrote about an unthinkable brutal murder that occurred in 1998, in the early morning hours, in Jasper, Texas. A man’s body was dumped in front of a church, after being chained to the back of a pickup truck and

dragged for three miles. I wonder what the commingling of screams, chains, and truck tires sounded like as those three men, two of them white supremacists, dragged him until his Black body lay quiet, on the side of a deserted, dusty dirt road.

*I bet he wished that he could fly  
Like a bird, in the sky  
So high  
Above the ones  
With all that hate inside*

*I didn't know it was a crime  
To be in my own skin  
Don't know the reason why  
It's a sin  
Where did it begin?*

(“Truck n Chains”)

Nearly 20 years later, I remember standing in a desolate Los Angeles canyon, the night getting blacker and colder as the minutes slowly ticked past midnight. I was producing a shoot reenacting that 1998 murder, so many years ago. As a producer, I had the fortune or misfortune, depending on your point of view, of being intimately acquainted with every grisly detail, as I was producing “Hate Crimes,” an episode of *Celebrity Crime Files*, a series that aired on TVOne.

Standing in that dark canyon, as I watched the actors get into place, I wondered what was going through Byrd’s mind as he was being chained to the back of that truck, beaten and in pain, having

been used as a human ashtray for red hot cigarette butts. Did he know he was about to die? Suddenly, my lip began to tingle. Hurriedly, I walked to my car and looked in the small rear-view mirror. A relatively large bump was now on the side of my lip. I wrapped my face in my scarf, hiding this new development, and hopped out of my car. It was going to be a long night. Several hours later, footage in hand, as I drove home in the early morning hours, I cried as I looked in the mirror at my now monstrously swollen lip. Did I suddenly become allergic to some kind of dust in the air? Or had my body had a physical reaction to a reality my mind couldn't comprehend, let alone accept? I was wearing the deformity, in a both a visceral and material way, that I imagine many believe Black skin to be.

The killing of that Black man, his name was James Byrd Jr., would lead Congress to pass the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act nearly 10 years later, in 2009, a performative, anemic gesture. Byrd's life is over and the dogged persistence of racialized violence against Black bodies persists; the body count continues to mount, broadcast through various media platforms for all the world to see. In May of 2022, 10 Black people were killed at a Buffalo supermarket in upstate New York. In 2019 the public murder of George Floyd, by a white Minnesota police officer, was caught on camera, for all the world to see. It is in these moments, more than any other, that I feel fixed, as if by dye as Fanon states, in my Blackness.

Trauma, violence, and loss are, more often than not, deeply, and personally intertwined within the Black experience. I never met my grandfather, Joe B. Paige. He died in 1967, before I was born. His

future cut short when the tip of a knife blade, slowly traveled through his body, for 20 years, until it finally reached his heart. My grandfather was a handsome, charming man, of short stature, with a quick temper and a big, loud personality. He was a foreman, the father of 10 kids, and a hard worker, who never hesitated to stand up for his family, even if it meant standing up to a white man or the cops. As the story goes, one day while working on the job in Mississippi, a white man told him he wasn't going to take orders from a nigger. A fight ensued and my grandfather was stabbed. At the hospital, he told the doctor the tip of the knife blade had broken off in his arm. The doctor didn't believe him. No further tests were done.

As a young scholar of race, culture and identity, my inquiry within the Center for Media, Religion and Culture is centered on the urgent need to write towards an understanding of why Black bodies, ever faithful to Jesus and the Democratic Party, have remained loudly marked on American soil throughout our sojourn in this country. I seek to cast light on the very thing that is casting me as Black. I am searching for a point of departure, a space of quiet, that will allow for new discourses around race and identity and the ways in which these constructs remain tethered to the strings of colonial and capitalist ideological formation within media and the larger society. I seek to know how we build quiet spaces of transformation. Spaces that are illuminated by the sounds of words, music, and joy, as a new, decolonial understanding takes shape, mandating a respect for humanity that goes deeper than a rainbow hierarchy of colors. Is it possible to form a more inclusive Habermasian



public sphere that allows for the voices of the subalterns, that Spivak so famously speaks of, to speak and be heard?

As James Baldwin stated, in a UC Berkeley auditorium in 1974, “We’ve always had to deal with this trouble. The problem is we cannot expect any help from most of our citizens or our government. It’s a matter of whether or not you have a future.” For me, it is a matter of whether or not we, as Black people, *can* have a future in America in which we are truly free to live a quiet, interior life free from the loudness of gun shots, chants for social justice and marches through the streets. I believe as Sartre asserts that writing is a certain way of wanting freedom; once you have begun, you are engaged. Unlike Sartre, I write with an urgent need to understand how an arbitrary marking of color continues to loudly define the Black American identity. I write for people who aren’t free, those people whose stories, experiences and subjectivities are largely unseen or ignored. I write because, as naïve as this sentiment may be, I want all people to be free to live a quiet, interior life.

I was actually sitting in the audience, all of three years old, when Baldwin spoke those words back in 1974. My mother, a graduate student in Anthropology at UC Berkeley, had taken my older brother and I to the event. I, of course, have no memory of hearing Baldwin speak. The only evidence that remains is a poster he signed. He wrote, “Shегun and Nandi, keep the faith.” It is no longer a choice but a matter of urgency. I have been called to write.

*Samira Rajabi*

# Urgency and Why I Write

I write because I have no choice. For me it was a matter of survival. I came here, to this university, to learn how to exist and work from a place of depth, of intellect, of insight, of background. I came here because I thought to enact change, to affect good, to be an agent of progress I had to know more, to be more, to see past the me. I didn't know the product of this vision would be words, spit on a page, emanating a life force of their own, with each strike on the keyboard like my life depends on it.

Understanding my life depends on writing it out, making it make sense. It depends on what my writing unearths, uncovers, untethers in me that helps me hold on to the world and let go of the world.

Indeed it felt urgent. It feels urgent.

Living in my life means understanding it. That has to be urgent, our life is now, that's what they say, right?

But I got here (academia, I think they called it when they asked me if I was an academic at the

door) and the pace was slow. The exploration was both rushed and gave me time. I had to produce something, to be something, to make something, but the research took time. True scholarship takes time, or so I'm told. The wheels of the academy move slow. But when all of that was overshadowed by illness, the writing was fast and hot, it was imperative, it was urgent for only me, everyone else survived, in their own paradigm. I, I needed a path, I wanted to write my way out of the pain, I needed to dig, to design, to pave a road that I could walk on, that I would walk on. It felt so important, it felt so urgent but I never figured out what it was in service of. Some kind of journey with no real destination. My life is the journey with no destination.

My illness was sudden but also slow. It was a drag, a step forward, two back, it demanded my urgent attention, and my pace was frenetic but what it was, in its true form it was slow, slow, slow. It had grown within me my whole life, just the change in what I knew of my body, of my mind, of my life suddenly made what was happening to me, inside me, within me urgent.

Some get my disease and they "watch and wait." They watch. They wait. That invitation was never open to me. So I run forward, at an almost manic pace. The familiar voice of my Peloton instructor telling me that I already won, "I woke up today." Little does she know, it is a celebration of chance masquerading as strength, a stable scan, a negative biopsy, waking up today with mortality breathing down my neck.

It is in this world, drowning in affirmations that change nothing yet change everything about me that I ask, that I think, that I wonder: What does

each thing I say, do, post, tweet, think, write, mean? What is it to mediate your life when that very life is at stake? But is anyone's life not at stake?

I'm learning they are all at stake. Not just because of the cold reality of mortality. My best friend died by his own hand but not his own mind. His body betrayed by illness we cannot understand. His life was at stake. I write for him. I write to save him. To make sense of him. It feels urgent, unmoored from every day, frantic, fast — but this writing will take a whole life. My whole life. And excavating these answers will not be fast, it will be slow, slow, slow.

I'm told to be present. Stave off the anxiety that this capitalist, frenzied pace induces by staying here. Running the mile I'm in. I'm drowning in affirmations, but why? To slow the moment down, to resist the urgency. To find myself in it. To ensure a future in a doomed world? To save it? Our mediations are constrained by culture, by capitalism but our bodies, what constrains them? I write to understand. To stand in ability and disability. To bear witness to the changes my body encounters with each rupture. To sit in the uncertainty in ways that do not indicate either mastery or resignation, but something altogether different. Something that, like my illness seems urgent but is slow, has been with me forever, but changes with me now.

When I came here the pace was slow and I learned that I write to understand what it is to live in this world. To survive in this world. To thrive in this world. To live an unfinished resilience in this world. To have a body. To be a body. I write to ensure my body's survival.

Who do I write to? Well, I suppose it is you — you with all the power and authority. And maybe, it's always been to me, because I've devoured so much of what you've thought of me. I write to you so that you know that I know, my power does not lie in the power systems you've built, but it is in my intrinsic value.

*Nathan Schneider*

# Real Colleagues

Whom do you lie awake at night worrying about?

This is a question I ask a lot. I ask it as a researcher, mapping the flows of power in the Internet economy, imagining how structures of governance and ownership might reach into nocturnal rhythms. When getting to know founders of companies and communities, as they think through their earliest challenges of organizational design, I vary the question a little: Whom do you *want* to be lying awake worrying about? I ask this because the middle of the night is when, for me, the worries surface that waking life succeeds in suppressing, when what matters most to me makes itself heard.

These questions are ways of asking about accountability. *How, to whom, and how deeply are you accountable?* For a scholar this is a way of asking, *To, and for, whom do you write?*

People lie awake worrying about a lot of things—about losing a home to a lost paycheck or a teenager out too late, about mortar fire in the distance or scratching sounds behind the wall, about what

should or should not have been said. But what tends to keep me up most nowadays is a good thing: friendship.

Abstractions, statistics, strategic plans, concepts — these do not keep me up. Friends do. Our official relationship might have another name: student, colleague, subject, collaborator, mentor. Yet at night it is as friendships, for me, that all the grand institutional realities find themselves expressed. Recall how the ur-sociologist Émile Durkheim bluntly characterized the “individual cult,” the solitary prayer, the far-flung hermit: “individualized forms of collective forces.”

In “To Experience Joy,” education scholar Cynthia B. Dillard revisits an essay she wrote decades earlier, as a junior professor. Back then she confessed, “I am looking for real colleagues.” She writes as a Black feminist, an outlier and even interloper in the academic guild, a fact she found herself reminded of daily. Real colleagues, she sensed then, could be the start of finding in that guild some elusive joy, if they who could see her for who she is and be seen. And, looking back from later, she did.

We cannot make an institution out of joy. Dillard does not provide a solution to the failures of the academic order or a substitute for it. The trouble with extolling the use-value of friendship is that friendship withers when you demand that it stay still and serve a stable purpose. Like a gift, it becomes something else if you try to cage it; yet we all know friendship has its uses — just as we know that gifts, even as they resist transaction, are an economy. The more the university sees itself as only an economy, too, the less it allows those of us within it to see the counter-economic action

around us, the friendships and the opportunities for joy. Teaching, learning, studying, writing — we forget their real value when we are trained to attend only to their metrics.

For Durkheim, friendship is an inkling of what can be possible with solidarity, a fleeting glimpse of a greater reality. But seeing through a glass darkly does not seem like enough to explain Dillard's joy. The cover of bell hooks and Cornel West's book *Breaking Bread* provides a better account: two elder scholars smiling generously, with their heads tilted together under the subtitle *Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* — resistance and pleasure, ends in themselves.

It has taken a few decades of scholarship to shake off the liberal-modernist dream and recollect what was obvious to philosophers a few thousand years ago: that friendship is politics, part of the struggle over the meaning of the good life and the power to achieve it. The Confucian classics understood friendship as the only one of the five relationships basic to a healthy society that does not depend on hierarchy. It exists not only between people but between peoples and states — the same logics apply interpersonally and diplomatically. Friends form and co-create each other. European thought presumes a more fixed conception of friends' selves, but there too friendship seemed “to hold states together,” as Aristotle put it. Justice is superfluous where there is friendship. Although no great friend of democracy, Aristotle allows that friendships “exist more fully” in democracies than in other systems. More recently, reading Aristotle through Michel de Montaigne, Jacques Derrida again identifies friendship with democracy. Both, for Derrida,



are things we can never quite have in their fullness. They are always not-quite, in the making, and “to come.” Even in that incompleteness, there is utility. Danielle Allen proposes friendship among strangers as a means of reconstituting a polarized political culture through useful bonds — a horizon, again, in service of politics.

In their siege of the university from the “undercommons,” Stefano Harney and Fred Moten confront the mighty institution with mere “study.” To learn together outside sanctioned spaces is to form a “fugitive community.” “The new general intellect” they see emerging, with its “extra-moral obligation to disturb and evade intelligence,” takes place among “all our friends.” Moten ends *The Undercommons* with a riff on Socrates accepting the invitation of “beautiful young boys” to talk about friendship, an undertaking “total, complete, but in an unexplained or undecidable completion.” When the institution is dissolved, or has not been properly invented yet, the basis of study is friendship.

Harney and Moten pose “contactual friendship” against the mediated and quantifiable “networked friending” that institutional regimes — social media companies, personnel committees — crave to count. Our mutual interests matter because we are in contact with them, because they bear down on us, a fact that we confirm with each other. They keep us up.

I have not yet achieved for myself Harney and Moten’s disillusionment with the university. I am relatively recently on record, for example, providing an historical account of the university as a rare site of worker self-governance, at least for its faculty

class. This feature is a vestigial remnant from parallel institutional inventions in China, North Africa, and eventually Europe, in which mutual accountability among scholars was organized to liberate each other's time from the immediate demands of the market or the political elite. One can appreciate this inheritance of self-governance without being blind to how the university has squandered it, surrendering too easily before the capitalist, imperial, patriarchal, and racist legacies it also inherits. To say the same thing with less freight of labels: we mustn't neglect the radicalism of our calling. Where the institution fails, its inhabitants rely all the more on friendship to better organize their accountability.

My disillusionment is incomplete, I suppose, because of friendships and other lines of accountability. Perhaps I found my way to my research projects out of abstract interest, but they hold me because of the people I have met through them. In my case, these are usually the "equitable pioneers," risking livelihoods and failure to build some corner of a more democratic economy. I write in order to be useful, out of reciprocity for what those people — often friends, and sometimes enemies, too — have taught me. When I see others in the university frustrated and joyless, I wish for them not more citations, not another publication, but friends who will keep them up at night and remind them why their work matters, and who will help them make it matter.

I would say we should teach friendship in the university, except I don't know that we can. It would wither on a syllabus or in a quiz, but it can find its way into the unwritten edges of our life-

work together. At best, we can acknowledge that we need it, and we need the university to not demand so much of us that we cannot anymore be friends, inside this place and out.

That is because friendship puts this old guild into perspective. It is an exit option, made out of commitment. Having friends outside the academic speedway may mean that you can see the off-ramp: If the university thing doesn't work out, there are other places to go, to work, to contribute. To earn those friends' respect, you resist the academic deskilling meant to teach you that it's here or nowhere, by fooling you into thinking you can only write papers, teach classes, and speak to a tiny group of specialists. Friends outside show you how all that you've been doing really can have worth elsewhere, and they teach you to bend your questions and methods so it actually does. The institution finds its purpose when it can be of help to one's fugitive friends.

Friendship of the democratic sort is contactual. It is labor, but without any pre-specified purpose, free and disruptive. It defies hierarchies but does not demolish them. It is a skill for endurance. And to whatever extent I have seen joy here in the university, it has been because of friends.

Anne Taylor

# The Urgency of Letting Things Fall Apart

*Things falling apart is a kind of testing and also a kind of healing. We think that the point is to pass the test or to overcome the problem, but the truth is that things don't really get solved. They come together and they fall apart. Then they come together again and fall apart again. It's just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy.*

Pema Chödrön, *When Things Fall Apart*

The task of this essay (*essayer* in French, to try) is to flesh out, as Sartre once did, why I write — to “feel myself essential in relation to my creation.” Ironically, the answer can never fully be given in writing, the ordering of words into sentences, of *langue* and *parole*. I have written nearly every day of my life since I was 12 years old. I write when I walk, I write when I move the furniture around my house. The question of “why do you write?” is like asking “why are you alive?” I write to teach and

learn; I write to know and be known, to know the unknown. I've always had an expansive, wild, associative imagination and a fascination with knowing the unknowable. Semiotics, for instance, makes sense to me like ritual prayer makes sense to me: there is a structure, a flow, to things that don't really make sense.

Why do I write?

There is an urgency to order life into neat categories. It is so distinctly Protestant of me to say so, but a penchant for the basic accounting of my spiritual life aside, order makes theories out of hypotheses, order keeps our finances balanced, order makes the world go 'round. Scholars in the 20th century tried to make order out of the seemingly disordered, of myths and meaning, to theorize its function in making a stable society. There is even an order to the critiques leveled at the structuralists and the functionalists; post-structuralists still have to go through peer review, after all. I am a social theorist, and the premise of my job, it would seem, is to find order in what I observe and make it legible to others. To bring stories into patterns that help us understand one another better.

But this urgency for order is also a fallacy, a false hope. Rationalization — presented to us “as an ahistorical and universal ‘Real’ against which other myths were shattered,” Jason Josephson-Storm writes — is as much a myth as Achilles' fight with Hector. If this is true, and I believe it is, the question lingers, “how do we work together to solve the many crises of our time?” How do we understand each other? I can't even trust that whatever it is that I write down here will make sense to you, the

reader. If categorical order is a fallacy, our scholarship risks making meaning as relative and as terrible as it was over one hundred years ago, in Nietzsche's day, when within a generation or two humanity went from Schopenhauer's nihilism to the war of the chemists.

This question of relative meaning is an urgent puzzle to solve: how can we study humanity, and illuminate the meanings of social life, without generalizing lived experiences into simple labels? Without reducing or hurting anyone?

So, why do I write?

Perhaps we've had it all wrong. Perhaps there should be room for us to allow things, like order (logs, codes, or otherwise), to fall apart, as Pema Chödrön says. Fall apart and come together. Fall apart again and come together again. There are descriptive statistics and correlations that can move the needle towards societal wellbeing, but the urgency for complete categorical order is an illusion. It is a desire for control in a world — a past, a future, a life — that can never truly be tamed. Physicists gave up on this long before the post-structuralists. Historian Elizabeth Clark reminds us that 20th century revolutions like relativity theory and quantum mechanics “cast doubt on the model of the omniscient observer.” As philosopher Raymond Aron argued in the 1930s, the past “attains existence only in minds, and changes with them.”

Thus, there is an urgency in the human sciences for letting things fall apart. When we resist the boundaries and enclosures of categorization, we open up space for cases that don't make sense at first (or second, or third) glance, for stories of pain and suffering that defy definitions and refuse rep-

representations. For joy, which poet Ross Gay says is when alienation drops away, when “everything becomes luminous,” like mycelium connecting us to one another and everything we need. bell hooks writes that “it is not easy to name our pain, to make it a location for theorizing,” but this is what we must do. Édouard Glissant calls this a relationality of life that one cannot express through classification but only through poetics. Relationality, he says, embraces a “science of Chaos [that] renounces linearity’s potent grip and, in this expanse/extension, conceives of indeterminacy as a fact that can be analyzed and accident as measurable.” Relationality, then, allows for expansive understandings of the social, of indeterminacy. “By rediscovering the abysses of art or the interplay of various aesthetics,” Glissant says, “scientific knowledge thus develops one of the ways poetics is expressed, reconnecting with poetry’s earlier ambition to establish itself as knowledge.” When we allow things to fall apart, in the present or in the narrative arcs of our past, there is an opportunity for healing.

I came to theory from theology. Despite its intended focus on the mysteries of the universe, the evangelical church I was raised in liked to order life into neat categories, too. There were blanks to fill in on Sunday morning sermon notes and well-defined rules for seemingly unruly teenagers. There were also rituals for when someone asked too many questions. I always asked too many questions. This wasn’t a stalwart contrariness; I questioned because I believed. I was in and out of the pastors’ offices, admired for my eagerness but carefully watched for my brazen youthfulness. It

was a bold move, on my part, to be a smart young woman. To be a woman. To be. The thing about this kind of urgency to know and be known, though, is that it never really is enough to hit the mark they set for you, is it? Never mind your womanhood, never mind your sexuality, never mind your questions. They'll keep moving the line. (The line isn't really real. Resist.)

When I asked too many questions about theology, I turned to the university. I pledged myself to becoming a professor that would walk beside students who didn't fit into categories but who were earnest and worthy, all the same. But asking too many questions about inerrancy and infallibility really is not that different from asking too many questions about logical positivism or scientific realism, is it? Questions upset the status quo. Associative thinking at my level, the tranche of the graduate student, isn't usually an asset but a liability. So are emotions. So is any kind of admission to a spiritual life that is woven into the intellectual.

"It [is] difficult to maintain fidelity to the idea of the intellectual as someone who [seeks] to be whole — well-grounded in a context where there [is] little emphasis on spiritual well-being, on care of the soul," bell hooks writes in *Teaching to Transgress*. "Indeed, the objectification of the teacher within bourgeois educational structures seemed to denigrate notions of wholeness and uphold the idea of a mind/body split, one that promotes and supports compartmentalization."

Again, you ask: why do I write?

There is an urgency to make way for the fluid, for the liminal. I write to build new realities for myself



and others. It's worth it to try, to let things fall apart so they can come together again, and we can attempt, through our scholarship and our teaching and the simple fact of existing in community together, to repair the mind/body split. I write so that there is always someone to walk beside you as we try this together. I write to attend to the human, as Krista Tippett says.

In writing, however, it must be said that I have both the haven and the hound. It is here that I can release my creative energy, make claims, build up my case as to why I should *profess*. It is also here that I will be sniffed out for my brazenness, my boldness, for how I could unsettle. This is the risk, for I *will* be judged for how I fit into the categories and maintain them — for my commitment to scientific rigor, to theoretical abstraction that breaks down methodological barriers and biases, to creative empirical puzzles that engage students, to paradigm building, to writing that is relatable, digestible, and citable. Don't be niche, they say, but make something new, okay? I am expected to somehow tame myself, to be well-liked with a tasteful irreverence, the pop star quality of Lin-Manuel Miranda circa 2008. To fit myself into a category. To make myself known.

Why do I write? Turns out, this is a quantum question. There can be no song of myself in academia; there is and always will be a song of myself. It is both.

Why do I write? I/we let things come together and fall apart again into a love supreme, into a polemicist sociology that seeks redemption and repair.

