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Crossing Borders / Shaping Tales

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erika duncan

What do we encounter when we invite those whose stories have been silenced and unsung to write intimate materials for an audience of “stranger-listener/readers”? What part do we play in navigating the divide between welcoming expression which might or might not find a listening ear, and teaching those forms that can break the barriers of marginalization?

In order to answer these questions, I want to tell the story of a community memoir-writing project I founded in the spring of 1996, more than three decades after Tillie Olsen published the first portions of what would become her groundbreaking book, *Silences*, in *Harper’s Magazine*.

Back in the late sixties and early seventies, many of us were caught up in the heady struggle to help one another break away from what Tillie Olsen described as “the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being and cannot. In the old, the obvious parallels: when the seed strikes stone; the soil will not sustain; the spring is false; the time is drought or infestation; the frost comes premature.”

By the mid-nineties, we were more sober. We had worked hard to make sure that women’s writing about their own lives would not be relegated to the private journal or diary. We had entered an era in which we could at last take for granted that the stories of ordinary women and men would be wanted by a reading public that increasingly sought out accounts of the triumphs and struggles of those who previously would have remained unseen and anonymous.

First-person narratives began to be sought, with unknown names attached to them. No longer were novelists, clinicians, or historians the ones to tell people’s stories for them. But still the gaps remained. For many who held stories inside them, educational deficiencies and lack of time and financial resources made it impossible to acquire the complex narrative skills that change one’s own story, as told to a close friend or diary, a court or a gathering of family, into something that would appeal to wider audiences.

At that time there were numerous community-based workshops offering both a listener base and encouragement of self expression. However, in the part of Long Island where I lived, nothing was available that provided economically and educationally disadvantaged people with the kind of intensive work with narrative technique and structure that is needed to construct a viable book.

The words of Tillie Olsen's *Silences* were very much present inside me when I offered to give a week of free workshops to any woman in the community who wished to tell her story, never dreaming that ten years later, Herstory Writers Workshop¹, as we came to be called, would turn into a community writing project with fourteen branches on Long Island, including three workshops for women incarcerated in Suffolk County's two prisons, and a growing Latina project that reaches out to Long Island's migrant workers—nor that we would be publishing a bilingual literary magazine.

Until that March morning when I opened the doors of the Town of Southampton Cultural Center, where I would be holding my first free workshop, I had felt that for intimate or painful stories it was absolutely necessary to have a consistent audience and a certain amount of privacy. Workshop members would need to count on that, as they were opening themselves up on the page. I hadn't realized how my thinking would change in a setting in which nothing prevented a stranger from walking in just as a participant was in the middle of crafting an intimate revelation.

By the time I had second thoughts about whether such a public format would work for material so private, it was too late to turn back. To make the best of what I assumed was a bad situation, I found myself helping each speaker to playact how she would most want to be heard by the "stranger/reader," walking in on her life on whatever "page one moment" she would choose.

What I didn't take into account when I devised this exercise was the way that responses to capturing the caring of a stranger could bring students of all backgrounds into the sort of narrative study that could sustain them for years.

¹The name Herstory, taken from early Feminist Days, and deeply belonging to others before us, was attached to the conference through which I was invited to give my workshops, and stuck, even with the awareness that it had been widely used.

This would become increasingly important to those of us concerned with the urgency of “diversity.” For it allowed college professors and already published writers to work on level ground with those whose life circumstances had allowed for little formal schooling. It allowed for work across race, class, age, and culture, as women who had little in common save for their desire to turn their memories to memoirs worked together side by side for the months and often years it takes to write a book.

Writing for the Stranger

When we write for a stranger, we are asking her to cross a border, out of her experience into our own. We cannot lure a reader into making a crossing unless we provide her a path. In making sure that our Herstory groups each contain women whose life experiences set them apart from one another, we give our participants a chance to test their pathways from the start.

For the sake of this article, I am choosing border crossings that were not only fraught with drama but, in addition, were likely to create strong responses—whether of support, curiosity, standoffishness, moral judgment, or disdain—depending on the reader’s preconceived feeling about each of the situations described.

The first story involved a newly trans-gendered woman, who came to Herstory wanting to begin her book at the moment of her sex change operation. Would that make her “just any” trans-gendered woman? I found myself musing while watching the faces of the women in the room reflecting responses to the situation presented left over from the time before they met the teller. Might our teller find another spot in which we would come to know the wishes and dreams that had led up that moment, so that even those who might be shocked or disapprove might be with her by the time she arrived there? Or would such a narrative choice just be pandering to those who might be prejudiced? What did it mean to introduce those questions into the moment of choosing?

The second story involved an Islamic woman who wanted to write around the theme of climbing over the walls and removing the veils that had surrounded her mother’s growing up years, which still cast their shadows on her life. Again I

had found myself wondering: How were we to find her a starting point specific enough to evoke our personalized caring, yet broad enough to cradle her story within her chosen theme?

The third example involved a woman wishing to start her narrative on the brink of taking her six children to a shelter. As we set her into evaluating which part of the story would trigger the movement back to the cause of her leaving, as well as the movement forward into her new life, the same questions that came up in all border crossing narratives were raised.

Finding a Way In

In our training workshops, and in our ongoing groups, I often speak of how hard it is to have a character die or make love on page two, before the reader has had the opportunity to particularize either the loss or the joy.² I speak of finding a moment in which the circumstances will fast forward us into a caring we cannot possibly have at the start, whether those circumstances arise out of action in which the reader will need to join the narrator right away, or from what Virginia Woolf so eloquently labels “moments of being.”

For example, if I were to bring out pictures of my twin grandchildren, any viewer would of course say “how cute,” because she wouldn’t have much choice, but she wouldn’t really care about them unless she knew me. So too, is it difficult to start with a moment of fear of being turned back at a border—if one doesn’t yet know what “back” is for that narrator, nor what forward journey she dreams.

It is tricky to start at the moment of choosing to undergo a very radical change—whether of gender, geographical placement, or station in life—unless the person immediately backtracks into scenes and memories that pave the way for the “change from what?”

If the crossing is fraught with danger, these difficulties will be both obscured by voyeuristic curiosity and heightened.

²There are, of course, wonderful exceptions to this in literature. My favorite is the opening page of Maxim Gorky’s autobiographical trilogy, where the death occurs on page one, not two, and becomes a way into the rest of the narrator’s story. We are not asked to care for the person who died.

Where Human Rights Education and the Study of Narrative Structure Overlap

On the day that Donna Riley first joined us, she told us that she wanted to write about the transition from her life as a man, starting with the moment of her sex change operation.

Would that make her “just any” trans-gendered woman “crossing a border?” I asked myself. Was there a way to find the specificity that would draw the reader into the person instead of the situation, so that pre-existing feelings in the reader wouldn’t take over right away?

Rather than deflate Donna’s desire to start there, I dared her not to tell us the whole story, but rather to map out the first scene as the reader would encounter it when she opened Donna’s book, as if she were placing a telephoto lens over the scene.

This is very different from the way we would normally ask people to introduce themselves, and creates fertile ground, even as it forms a safe boundary, in which the book or story (the object being made) is separated from the teller.

As Donna tried out what might happen if she kept within the boundaries of her chosen moment, the tag ends that kept popping out concerned her wife of twenty years, a woman with whom she still lived and whom she still loved. What would happen, I wondered, if she picked a moment previous to the day of the surgery, in which we might meet her and her wife in a manner that would particularize the story? That way, by the time we were ready to undergo the amputation of a vital bodily member, the tale would already be propelled by many threads.

However I didn’t want to pull Donna’s story in that direction out of my own interest in stories of love between women. Nor did I wish to let any of the other students, out of their own curiosity, tempt her to towards narrative choices that she wouldn’t ordinary make.

Only after I had let her meander for a while did I find myself saying, “It is hard to imagine amputating a penis if we don’t yet know how the teller feels about that penis, and yet, to play devil’s advocate one could start with the shock value of that moment, in which the reader, because of her own strong reaction whatever it might be, would be deeply engaged.” It was then that Donna started to tell us a story of how she had been a mortgage broker who worked in a bank and sported a three-piece suit.

Note, now, how we could have gone in a different direction that left the two women behind, as Donna happily regaled us with details about the fight that occurred in the bank where she was working during the time of transition, when management couldn't decide which bathroom she should use and concluded that she shouldn't be allowed to use any; how that coincided in time with her ceasing to be Douglas, leading her to leave the bank, taking with her the ten employees she supervised, as she took her first new job as Donna.

Note how different in tone a story starting in this way might be. It is like being a composer and trying to determine what key to be in, or being a painter and deciding whether to work in siennas and ochres or to sport shocking primary colors.

Note also how having several beginnings on the floor not only increases images of possible structures, but gives the teller time to try them on for size, to see which one best fits her temperament.

If you give just one example, the student is likely to seize it. If you give nine or ten, the examples will be so blurred with one another that the student is almost forced to come up with an eleventh that will be truly her own.

Present in that workshop session was Rukhsana Ayyub, who was writing about her attempt to escape the world of her foremothers, who had lived behind veils and high walls. As I thought about how working with structure makes a safe space for every sort of content, I couldn't help pondering what Rukhsana might be thinking about Donna's tale.

As I wondered whether one would judge the other, I thought about the meaning of "just any" (whether day-laborer at a border, Islamic woman behind a veil, or trans-gendered woman at a crossroad.)

"Let us leave your beginning for now, so that you can daydream yourself a bit more into the page one process," I said to Donna, knowing that as one after another of the other workshop participants would speak, Donna's sense of her own shape would deepen.

I suggested that Rukhsana tell the tale of her first Herstory workshop session. When I had asked Rukhsana to feel her way into shaping her opening scene, she told us that when she was trying to find our meeting place in West Babylon

she had gotten lost and found herself going around and around under various tunnels that ran under the highway near the community center where we met.

“When you asked for my page one,” she explained now to Donna, “I kept thinking of how I felt going under those tunnels and how when I was a little girl our house had a very low wall around it and one day I made a tunnel under it. You see, even though it was only a low wall, and my father had taken my mother into a free marriage, my mother was still trapped in the way she had grown up and didn’t want her children to go outside of the wall. I crawled through the tunnel, and when I came up on the other side of the wall, I could see that my mother was smiling at me.”

She added, “I am still in an arranged marriage, and I guess I am writing to see where I will come up.”

I don’t remember much about the other stories that were worked on that day. Amy was weaving a memory portion, while Rose experimented with keeping her prose choppy in a moment when her players were out of control. Lonnie was adding new smells and sensations.

I waited until Donna had heard all of the readings before asking her to take another go at imagining her opening scene. Showing ways in which each reader was playing with which area of her story held the others, I put forward the possibility of introducing the two women together as they prepared for the change. That would be one way, I said, to fast forward us into knowing enough of the story, so that by the time of the operation we would be inside, instead of standing on the outside looking in.

Then we talked for a while about whether Donna would rather go with the scene at the bank with the bathrooms, which would open her book in one kind of tone, or select a love moment between the women. Again, what was critical here was our stepping back once we helped her to generate the choices. Donna did choose the love relationship idea, for, as I had sensed right away when she had spoken of her wife’s support of her feeling of being born in the wrong body, this tale would be central in the narrative of her transition.

We asked Donna to pick out a setting or occasion or two in which we might meet the women, and to image out each one for us as concretely and spon-

taneously as possible, knowing that the next day or the next, when she was in the shower, or daydreaming while making her morning tea, the real opening scene would appear.

Note that without playing out the imaging, very often what will be born will be something that will be either too detached or will flood the reader with too much right away, or else it will be a scene that will not possess the dynamism to lead to the next scene and the next. Even if the scene is changed, the idea of what might propel a work forward (while opening for us a doorway into knowing the teller) is provided.

A week later, Donna came in with a scene picturing two (as yet unknown) women walking along a pier in Sag Harbor, as a gentle breeze brushes their long flowing skirts against their legs and a man in the distance calls out, “Hi ladies!”

The narrator is elated at the call, but the other woman begins to cry, finally saying, “I love you, but I don’t know if I can be a lesbian.” From there the story of the narrator’s feeling that she was born in the wrong body rapidly unfolds, as we learn that the crying woman is the narrator’s wife of twenty years and that this is the first time the couple has gone out in public with both of them dressed in female clothes.

Did Donna plan what would be flashback and what would move forward? Of course not! Did she say to herself, “Now I will use this image to reveal this fact that the reader must know”? We knew that she didn’t. However, the work we had done the week before to make sure that she was situated in a moment of narrative potential gave her parameters through which she might work out of interiority and action at once.

In another couple of pages, we the listener/readers learned for the first time of the existence of a twenty-year-old son, through a scene in which the crying woman begins to speak of her fear of “telling him.” Did it surprise us that Donna who had never written creatively before could use dialogue and internal monologue with a rhythm that moved her story at a speed that worked well?

Without leaving the scene that Donna created on the page, we learned of the impending sex change operation, and were set up in both suspense and caring for how the story would move forward, even while our wondering at how the

women had arrived at this point deepened.

It was easy to point out the sort of questions that would keep the reader turning page after page. “Would the two women make it together? What would it mean to one when her partner was no longer a man? What would it be like?”

As soon as Donna stopped reading, Rose looked up with tears in her eyes. “So it really is a love story,” she said. And those words, in turn, helped Donna reveal even more deeply the emotion that existed in this border crossing that one woman needed and the other one feared, so that for all the listeners, the courage to touch their own needs and fears grew greater.

That night in the parking lot, Rukhsana came over to me. “You know, I never felt I belonged anywhere,” she said, “but tonight I understood that none of us belong, and I felt I belonged perfectly.”

Meanwhile Rukhsana was working out a narrative dilemma of her own. No two students have the same way of nesting story within story, which is part of the pleasure of teaching, but each can draw structural inspiration from the others. That allows content to belong sacredly to the teller, while the structure becomes the meeting ground.

In order to tell the tale of her own life, Rukhsana felt she needed to speak of how her mother had the first love marriage in her village, how her father had made a sort of ceremony of breaking with tradition, removing the veil and taking her out from within the high walls. She could easily recite the facts. But could she put herself back there, becoming the listening child who first heard the stories? Would putting herself back there explain why, when it came time for Rukhsana to marry, her mother became frightened and pulled her backwards?

Rukhsana had written a scene describing those rare occasions when her grandfather used to allow the women of the household to go down to the river to cool off on very hot nights, when it was too dark for them to be seen.

... there they would sit still wrapped and covered up and soak their feet in the water. Nano would loosen the strap of her burqa under her chin; the girls would loosen the chadors wrapped around their shoulders and feel the cool air coming off the water...

The river flowed fast at their feet. None of them knew how to swim or had ever dared enter the water. Mom says she loved the speed of the water, even though it used to scare her. She was always careful as she sat down on the steps to soak her feet, for she was so afraid of being carried away by the current. That was what had happened to two older cousins [while the women on the shore] had sat there shocked, literally biting their hands, for fear of letting out a cry, fear that Grandpa would be angry with them for raising their voices. Fortunately a late night fisherman had seen the two of them bobbing up and down [in] the water quietly and had pulled them out.

In telling this second-hand story, Rukhsana had embellished the scene by the river. However, in order to make it her own, we knew it needed to be nested in the context and time period in which she had received it. As we had helped Donna develop her scene of the pier in Sag Harbor, so we helped Rukhsana to search for her own river scene:

[My brother and I] would be running ahead of [our parents], my brother in shorts and tee shirt and me in a little frock that mother had sewn in the design from English magazines that Dad would bring home. Sometimes I would get loud and scream and insist on taking the frock off so that I could go into the water in my underwear. Mom would get very quiet and then she would tell me the story not too long ago of her and her cousins' visit to the river in the quiet of the night.

What was heady for the group members was the way each person's scene evolved week after week in response to the shared questions around structure. It didn't matter whether what was added was a sensation such as wind blowing a woman's skirt worn outdoors for the first time against bare legs, or a description of a girl's frock on a hot day that called up dialogue, forgotten thoughts, and the whole being of a long-ago self, which, unrecorded, might have been lost.

A week later Rukhsana was able to add:

I used to find it so hard to believe the story and would ask my mother again and again, "Really Ma, really, you never even uttered a cry on seeing your cousins drift away in the river and neither did your cousins scream as they were floating away?" I would then try and imagine how I would react if I saw someone drowning away in the water. My brother and I would try and make different sounds as we ran along the river banks pretending to see girls drowning. Mother would blush and laugh. Then Dad would start a long monologue about how ridiculously old-fashioned Nano's whole family was.

Teaching techniques for the creation of drama, along with helping the speaker know that we genuinely want to care about what a situation means to each player, allows the slowing down that makes it possible for the writer to recreate happenings so that she may truly experience them, even as she is putting them to rest.

When we pick out the big things (the big border crossings or the big social agendas) we become stuck. It is in little ways, in learning to expand once again those small moments of being, that the big picture becomes clear, and the particularity of the teller emerges from its shyness to speak.

The fact that each structural conundrum we ask our students to ponder has no right answer is part of the appeal. I have noticed that my students at all levels love to work together to figure what works and why. So now, through the work of the third woman, Paulette Sellers, let us look at a situation in which it did work to start the narrative at the exact moment when she decides to take her six children to a shelter. Note the pacing of this passage, reproduced in its original written form:

I can still here it all in my mind as if a record is skipping. Wait I am coming, please give me five minutes. I ran up the stair tripping over my own feet You kids come on, they look at me as if I had lost my mind. I said with a tremble in my voice, you coming or staying. I grab some

clothes and pamper for the baby and told the other kids to get them some clean clothes we would be gone for a while. I told them when we reach the bottom of the stair don't stop nothing, get out side and get in the car and lock the doors. My voice crackled and all you could hear were doors slamming. What wrong mom my little kids ask I didn't answer .The older kids said leave mom alone can't you see she gone to try an drive this car you'll buckle up. The kids lock all the door just like I told them. And to my surprise the oldest girl started praying and it went something like this. Dear God I know that I don't normally talk to you mom said that when I am in trouble to ask you to help me .I don't know what to ask you for really so please keep us together and safe please Jesus thank you. Then she told the kids to sing with her. Jesus love me this I know for the bible tell me so.

When Paulette first imaged this piece out loud, she gave us the bare bones to the extent that everyone was riveted by the situation, when suddenly she stopped and asked: But don't I have to tell you what led up to this point? It was then that we made the decision together that the drama of the opening moment would immediately draw in the reader and then it would be even more effective for her to immediately loop back.

The idea that the first backwards loop should be through the daughter's prayers, which indeed gives us a great deal of information, didn't come to Paulette until she was actually writing. However, without our preliminary work in playing out the elements of backtracking to give information, she might never have arrived there. Now the opening leads us effortlessly into understanding a story to which we were strangers just minutes ago.

I turn the key and it started right away. I was saying in my mind r is reverse the big paddle is the brake. I reach up and pull the shifter until it reach R we back up very slow I didn't know how to drive and that big 9 passage station wagon scared me to death. All at once I hit the brake I know I hit them to hard because the car jerked I pulled

the shifter some more and it reach the little d is this the right d or should it be the big d. I didn't know and didn't have time to ask .I pulled slow out of the drive way. I wasn't a block from the house and every car that came pass flash their headlight at me. I knew that meant My high beams was on. So I pulled over to the side of the road and try to figure out how to turn them off no should luck. I had to turn around back to the house.

Had we not encouraged Paulette to give images of her not knowing how to drive, the small details that follow might never have taken her (and us) back there.

I walk in just as bold as I could be and say how in the hell do I turn off the high beams. He went over to the door and block it, and I became very afraid so much afraid that I could feel the sweat rolling down my arm. He try to sweet talk me. He said you know I love you and I didn't answer. Why you want to hurt me like this I didn't answer he said pull the blinker toward you and they will cut off but in my mind I thought the same reason why you always want to hurt me. He kept talking I thought that I was going to be hit for sure. All at once he stop talking step away from the door with a big smile and said you're not going any where it raining and you don't even like to ride in the rain so you sure don't want to try and drive in the rain. Tell the kids to come in side your not going any where. Then I answer him and said ok. I walk very slowly out the front door went to the car hopped in it and started it up and drive away. There was no going back now not if I waiting to keep on breathing. I sat at the police station. Cry on the inside Lord what do I do now.³

³ Paulette Sellers' piece appears in full in *Affila, Journal of Women and Social Work*, Volume 19, Number 4, with all of the original phrasing kept intact and only the spelling corrected. Rukhsana Ayyub's piece appears in a slightly edited version. I will never forget the joy on Paulette's face as she rocked back and forth in our rocker, with the magazine on her lap, saying over and over, "I'm published. I'm published."

Activism as the Impulse/Taking the Reader There as the Tool

Writing, at its best, can open the eyes of the unconverted; it can change people's lives. To work on formulating stories of oppression, hope, and triumph; and to learn with one another the tools to transform what is hidden into something that can be heard, is an experience like no other.

However, the production of writing that can truly be heard by another doesn't happen by magic. Had our Herstory group been less diverse, had the samples been more similar in content, perhaps we wouldn't have been able to develop tools that went from structure to structure, showing each writer how to build empathy and a desire to enter.

In closing, I would like to return to the words of Rukhsana, who, as one of the founders of the Committee for Domestic Harmony, dedicated to helping Islamic women fight domestic violence, had comfortably spoken in front of local as well as international gatherings.

None of these experiences can compare to the first time I read my work in public. Standing in a packed little bookstore, I read about my mother growing up under the veil and behind high walls in Pakistan. I read about the lives of these women whose names were not allowed to be spoken outside the walls of their homes. I was not only climbing walls myself but I was bringing with me generations of women before me. It was one most exhilarating as well as scary experience. By the time I got home from the reading I had developed severe throat pain and could not speak for a few days.

As we devise tools to help those who have been silenced to effectively speak, we must remember that the passage from one state to another isn't easy, that when we assist someone in crossing a border we ourselves haven't experienced, we must be careful to go slowly, easily enough, so that writers and listener/readers can be in harmony. Only then will the barriers that keep us apart begin to dissolve.