

“Dancing with Words”: From the CLASP notebooks of a mid- career humanities Eastern European woman academic in London

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1 TAKING RISKS WITH WRITING

Let me tell you a story. When I came to the CLASP Fellows Program following the dark days of the Covid-19 pandemic, words were like wolves to me. I was afraid of them, alienated from them, estranged from them, and frightened by them. I forgot how to write. Or, possibly, I never knew how. The Fellows Program, the writing techniques I learned, and Freewriting were a way of taming the wolves and taming the words. bell hooks calls her writing “dancing with words.”¹ It is not quite a dance for me yet but surely I have learned my first steps. And the music is that of my own voice – the breath, the rhythm, the color, the pitch, the timbre – and the accent. Thank you for dancing with me today.

This essay is about my experience of a two-year long Fellows Program through the Bard College Institute for Writing and Thinking (IWT) Center for Liberal Arts and Sciences Pedagogy (CLASP). The Fellows Program is a professional development opportunity for early and mid-career academics that focuses on training Fellows in writing across the curriculum through sets of different writing techniques, exercises, and prompts. Some of the key terms used to describe the CLASP Fellows Program and the work of IWT are “writing to think,” “writing to read,” and “creating collaborative and horizontal classrooms through writing.” Founded by Bard College President Leon Botstein IWT has been going on for a few decades now. Its main goal has been to promote writing across the curriculum as the key pedagogical tool not just at Bard College, which is a liberal arts college in upstate New York, but also across OSUN (Open Society University Network), of which Birkbeck – my university in London – was part. Other member institutions are a mix of private and public universities in Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, Colombia, Palestine, Lithuania, Haiti,

Ghana and South Africa. We were guided, directed and nurtured by erica kaufman, IWT's Director, a poet, an academic, a literary mentor in the truest sense of the word, and the most wonderful human being.

We were a group of fifteen Fellows coming from diverse academic institutions and from different disciplines who met twice a year in person for a week-long writing workshop and had about four to five half-day meetings annually on Zoom in the interim periods. We are the third and the last cohort of Fellows; with the transition from OSUN to GHEA21 the program has sadly stopped accepting new cohorts.

You might wonder what made my group of Fellows so special. I realize now that we were brought together by circumstances, as we were all working at OSUN institutions, but also by serendipity. I enjoyed the company of the other Fellows and sharing the experience of the Fellows Program with this group. But the knowledge that other cohorts which preceded us also felt as bonded and fond of each other as we did makes me realize that it was not just the quality of my colleagues in my group which made this shared experience so powerful. It was down to the type of practice we were being exposed to – which was writing as a pedagogical and research tool. On my part I was drawn to the Fellows Program not only because it was an exciting professional training opportunity involving travel and meeting like-minded people, but most importantly because it had writing practice at its very core. I suppose the other Fellows came to CLASP through a similar route. I believe that it was our shared interest in writing and being intrigued by the potential of writing for teaching, research, and thinking which brought us together. But there is more. For me, the interest in writing was rooted in the deep uncertainty I felt around academic writing. There was something dissatisfying and deadening in having academic writing as the only mode of writing practice I gave myself the permission to do. I think I might have been unique or in a very small minority in my cohort to carry such a degree of resentment and conflict around the academic mode of writing.

By the time the Fellows Program came my way I was at the end of my tether with academic writing and felt I reached the end. I embarked on the Fellows Program with the hope to get out of the trap of academic writing I found myself in. I didn't realize back then, but wouldn't care if I did, that engaging in the writing practices the Fellows Program proposed I was taking a risk. At the heart of the Fellows Program, the way I understand now after having experienced it, lies the radical move to dislodge academic writing from the supreme position it holds in academic learning and teaching, and to replace it simply with "writing" This writing is most free, most effective and most transformative when it is simply Freewriting. To decouple "academic" from "writing" in the university context is an unorthodox step which breeds suspicion and uncertainty, but it is only the first and necessary one. Doing the Fel-

lows Program meant not only to take this risk but also to follow through with the consequences while still operating within the academic context. In other words, as Fellows, we were invited to write freely but also to keep in mind the academic or university context within which we were writing. I learned through experience that writing freely (but remaining mindful of the academic frame) produced, if we wished so, pieces of writing which would have all the qualities of academic writing at its best and most compelling. They would be reasoned, critical, and insightful, and fully admissible within the disciplinary boundaries. But most of the time we were producing something else which was providing foundations for shaping the writing further than we may have wanted.

Refusing to contribute directly and intentionally to the edifice of academic writing but rather making academic writing one of many possible outcomes of our writing was a way of taking a risk and challenging ourselves, our students, and our colleagues in ways which opened us all to criticism and rejection. In the words of bell hooks we “risked being dismissed as not being theoretical ‘enough’, intellectual ‘enough.’”² Not being “enough” in the academic context turned out to be a breathtaking journey of self-discovery through writing. This is the risk I want to continue to take.

I responded to the invitation to write with enthusiasm, passion, and dedication that astounded me and even took me aback at times. I was surprised how much I needed it. The Fellows Program reminded me of the fact that I used to like writing – a lot – but never the academic prose, structure, and texts. The stakes and standards were too high. The Fellows Program gave me the permission to simply write. And, possibly more importantly, it gave me the permission not to write in an academic way. But there was more. I experienced the kind of ideas such free, unbridled, low-stakes writing can generate; how the intentional commitment to writing away from an academic essay can result in a very interesting and intriguing academic text, if you wished for it to evolve in this direction.

As I am almost at the end of the Fellows Program I wanted to reflect on why and how this has been so transformative for me both personally and professionally. I want to explore the foldings and unfoldings of what has happened to me.* Through a set of dramatic interventions, it allowed me to establish my identity as a writer and find my own writing voice. It has changed my attitude to teaching, research, and thinking. These interventions fell into three broad categories. Firstly, I grew as a writer through the practice of writing techniques that put value on the process of writing as opposed to the final product, which might be an essay, a dissertation, a marked assignment, an article, a book or a book chapter. In other words, I am a writer because I engage in Process Writing, and not because my work is published or submitted as an assignment, as would be the case with our students’ work. Sec-

* I would like to thank Erzsébet Strausz for suggesting this turn of phrase to capture my intention in this essay.

ondly, I forged my identity as a writer by learning how to write collaboratively both with my colleagues and with my students. Thirdly, I came to experience the power of bringing personal experience into my writing, which fundamentally changed the meaning of writing for me.

2 SAVED BY WRITING

It all started at the point of a real struggle I was experiencing with the very act of writing. I applied to IWT on two separate occasions, once to do their weeklong summer writing workshop and again to participate in the Fellows Program. I mention these two applications because they were written without a very good understanding of what the workshop or the Fellows Program might be about. I had to find some reasons within me to imagine what these experiences could offer me. For my first application I wrote about feeling stuck in my writing practice and not understanding why academic writing in English became such an ordeal for me and something that I felt blocked from doing. That contrasted with my original excitement about writing in English when I moved from the Polish to the American secondary education system and then continued studying in the US. Back then, stepping into English from Polish was an exciting journey of self-discovery. I truly found a way to redefine myself in English. But then three decades down the line I found writing in academic English very difficult indeed.

Let me tell you a little tale about a moment that planted the seed of who I am today – an academic, writing in English. I remember being astounded by the size and holdings of the high school library in the middle of Kansas prairie where I came to spend a year as an exchange student. In hindsight I realize that the library was neither big nor extensive. Actually, it was very modest. But it was there where I realized the scope and extent of writing in the English language which could not be matched by anything I could have been exposed to in Polish. Despite visiting and working in many different libraries since, I have never been as affected as I was with the encounter with that high school library in Kansas. That library held a promise and offered a taste of a different and vast linguistic, cultural, artistic, social, and historical universe.

This joyful and full of promise encounter with English continued throughout my undergraduate years in the United States but began to atrophy as I embarked on the first steps of my academic career as a PhD student. Despite far better libraries and my growing competence in English I found writing in academic English a painful experience. What followed were truly bittersweet years of laborious and joyless writing culminating in some sense of achievement when this writing appeared

in print. Over the years I held students to the same high standards of academic writing I held myself to. Some excelled in it. Others like me – less so.

Why did I find the straitjacket of academic writing so constraining? Anyone who has ever embarked on writing an academic essay knows its strict rules. The way in which the “I” or any subjective experience is not to interfere with the critically driven and balanced discussion is one of the key ones. Or at least it has been when I was taught how to write. It was not about negotiating to have the subjective there or not. It was simply not welcomed. It took me years to realize the consequences of keeping my “I” at bay in my academic writing and not allowing it to somehow contaminate it. I ended up creating some other type of writing persona which only existed in my academic writing. We were never well- acquainted. I found her to be a perfect stranger most of the time.

Then there was my transitioning from the American academic environment where I was an undergraduate student to the British one which I entered as a post-graduate student. A shift of gears in terms of academic standards would be expected in either of the contexts as I was advancing up the academic ladder. Yet for me the impact was compounded by transitioning into the British cultural and linguistic context which was markedly different from the American one. I found this transition intriguing and exciting but also very disorientating. I struggled to convey my authentic enthusiasm for the topic of my doctoral research into vibrant and engaging pieces of academic writing. I was constantly off-key in my writing – missing notes, hitting wrong pitches, sounding flat to the ears of my supportive but increasingly worried supervisors. I will never forget a comment by one of them who said “I wish you could write the way you speak.” My research was a shooting star of academic writing; an exciting promise which didn’t last. What I heard my supervisor saying was that I wasn’t effective enough in translating my impassioned response to the topic of my research into a compelling enough piece of academic writing. Two decades after I finished my PhD and after a number of published academic pieces, I was entering the CLASP Fellows Program haunted by the old questions. How does one modulate one’s academic voice, so it sounds both authoritative and personal? How does one convey expertise and knowledge in a digestible and engaging way while always appearing fully and utterly in control of the entire research and writing enterprise?

These questions relating to my professional practice had a deeply personal underbelly which had to do with my status as a non-native speaker of English. I cannot pretend that I know how to explain what it means to construct oneself in a different language than your native tongue, especially when this second language is also a tool that enables jobs and daily survival. For this reason, my academic writing in English was a vessel not just for my professional identity but also a

source of my economic survival. We treated each other with due respect but we were never friends. At the background another language, the first language, the native tongue was always lurking; audible in my written and oral English expression. Sometimes it pushed so hard that my dreams got all mixed up. It's like someone has jammed the radio waves. Sometimes I had dreams about how difficult it was to express myself – in any language I know. When I embarked on the Fellows Program I was looking for a key to unlock the potential for expression and creativity – in any language – that the academic writing had buried so deep within me that I came to believe it didn't exist.

But before CLASP came the Covid-19 pandemic which put a nail into the coffin of any of my writing, including academic writing. I entered a long period of self-doubt in both the quality of my writing and the meanings I tried to convey through it. It was a dark, cold, and helpless place. It was only then I began to realize the extent to which my (professional) identity was bound up with my ability to produce and write in academic English. When this ability evaporated in the pressure-cooker of the Covid-19 pandemic I was cast adrift. Writing freely and writing collaboratively, which the Fellows Program enabled, became my way of reconnecting with myself, my students, and maybe even with my academic colleagues. The promise of this connection was so strong that all I wanted to do was to continue writing in this way. I wrote my way out of this darkness only to find myself in a different and unexpected place where writing was free, where my voice and I mattered.³ But I didn't know any of this when I applied for the Fellows Program.

The application to the Fellows Program needed an endorsement of my institution and it was framed as a professional development opportunity. There I wrote about wanting to close a gap in my teaching practice which existed in the ways we approached writing – its role and purpose – in our classrooms. The final essay was an end point and the goal for students to reach. Through tutorials with students, we supported the development of students' ideas but not the development of their writing craft. The only writing that ever mattered was the one which constituted the final essay. That was a very particular and reductive way of approaching writing. What troubled me was that my teaching practice left little material trace. Students could take notes but there is something unstructured, undirected and voluntary about it. I wanted my students to create written archives of their time in the classroom which was not just based on their notes, but generated in a much more purposeful and directed way. I argued that my training in the IWT writing techniques was the way to transform my classroom into a writing community.

How did the Fellows Program allow me to achieve both goals? I am still on the journey, and this journey will continue for as long as I write. So, the reflections in this essay are just a snapshot from where I am now on my path.

3 UNDER THE SPELL OF FREEWRITING

So often in life the simplest gestures or acts end up being most consequential. This is what Freewriting was for me. It was one of the writing and reading techniques that IWT promotes. Others are Writing in the Zones, Dialectical Notebooks, Loop Writing, writing to images, popcorn reading, Text Explosion, and others. Each of the techniques assumes a situation whereby the participants want to explore a certain problem which may be expressed in a text, an experience, an object, a piece of music, a video clip – the sources are endless – through writing. Each of the techniques is set up as a series of very short writing prompts, which can be done during three to seven minutes' time. The students are supposed to write all the time during this period. "Keep your pen moving" is repeated a lot before the habits are established and working and writing this way becomes a second nature.

Private Freewriting is the technique which was my introduction into the IWT techniques, and it was the one which inspired me most on my journey. It has "enchanted" me, to use bell hooks' words.⁴ The prompt is simply to write freely a text that will not be shared with others. I found writing this way tremendously liberating. I loved the idea of just moving my pen and writing about not knowing what to write if I ran out of ideas. Somehow my hand always kept moving and there were unexpected ideas and associations coming up. I had so much to say and so much to write. All my writing blocks were just gone the moment I simply wrote freely and only for me. During these exercises I also realized the power of my own writing. The moment I began to write, I was enough. I was already creating a voice. I was creating myself and the theme. Every word counted but only if I chose for it to count. The meaning of what I wrote and what I chose to share was shaped by the community in which I was writing. What counted and carried real value was the intention and the choice to be together and to write at the same time when others were writing.

I learned that Private Freewriting is one of the most powerful IWT practices which is used not just at the start of a class but also in the middle – to refocus minds, to settle, to work through a difficult point or issue that might be challenging to the group. It is also used at the end of a class and then it is referred to as Process Writing. It allows one to reflect on what has happened during the session, what was learnt, what questions were raised, and what the next step on the learning journey might be.

Freewriting is a different way to have one's voice heard – by ourselves and by others. When we wrote privately the voice was only mine and only for me to hear. But we could also write privately with the intention to share when my voice would become audible to the audience and gain a different public resonance and meaning. Writing with the intention to share is one of the instances when writing can

become a source of relationships not just with oneself but with students and even with fellow academics, or others who are actively writing and listening. Shared writing carries in it an intention to create bonds but also to change or shift something in the world around us. The intention is contained in the triple act of writing, listening, and responding. And maybe writing again if it is a Loop Writing exercise.

Writing together, and freely, with an intention to share makes the impact of one's writing immediate. It is very powerful, unique, and different from the way academic writing works. There, the reaction of the reader is delayed and except for student feedback or reviews of academic writing, anonymous. It is read critically, not emphatically, which changes the registers of response and drives a wedge between the author and their writing. To be able to cope with criticism one must decouple oneself from the writing and the readers. In this sense classroom-based writing operates on the opposite spectrum of academic writing. It can also bring change in the listeners here and there without any delay.

Presented in this way, Private Freewriting and Process Writing may seem just like a source of good in-class mental hygiene. It is useful but how does it advance the learning aims and objectives? How does it support teaching and learning of disciplinary content apart from being a generous gesture of care towards students? What is the "usefulness" of these types of writing in developing students' academic writing skills? All these are valid and important questions to raise, which I have wrestled with to some extent. My classroom experience made me realize that the intellectual architecture of a course, the kinds of topics and themes which need to be covered, provide the necessary scaffolding which makes Free Writing and Process Writing both purposeful and useful intellectually. Directly or indirectly, all the writing done in a classroom circles around or speaks directly to the content which inspires the prompts. Seen in this way, Freewriting and Process Writing are ways of anchoring students' voices and ideas within the content which is explored in class.

4 CO-WRITING WITH OTHERS

In her various essays, bell hooks writes beautifully about her encounters and relationships with different writers. Some of them are alive and she met them in person, sometimes even becoming friends, and others she only knew through their texts. These relationships were foundational to her identity as a writer as many became her "literary mentors." But bell hooks is also someone who noted that even "though all academics write not all of them see themselves as writers."⁵ She continues "writing to fulfil professional career expectations is not the same as writing that emerges as a fulfilment of a yearning to work with words when there is no

clear benefit or reward, when it is the experience of writing that matters.”⁶ Being an academic who writes but who does not see herself as a writer was who I was when I embarked on the Fellows Program. During the program I realized that all the Fellows, including me, are first and foremost writers. I learned that through “the experience of writing” which was done in this special and unique space enabled by the community of the Fellows. While practicing all the IWT writing techniques during our weeklong in-person meeting and online, we didn’t discuss our disciplinary expertise, but we were writing together and reflecting on our pedagogies and compositions of our classrooms. Process Writing was the way in which we constituted ourselves as writers.

The CLASP workshops and the writing we did there demonstrated a way to model our classrooms differently. What became important was writing collaboratively. On the simplest level it meant writing together and simultaneously. Such synchronic and community-based writing is actually a very rare experience for most academics and students. Different IWT techniques stimulated that collaborative atmosphere and was a measure of our time together – popcorn reading and Dialectical Notebooks were among the key ones.

The easiest way to explain what Dialectical Notebooks are is to think about them as a form of correspondence or letter writing. Students write on a sheet of paper divided into three (or more) columns. Each student has their own set of columns. Once they write in one column, they exchange notebooks, and they write in the second column and so on. This is a powerful writing exercise to explore an idea in a text, a concept, or an image. Once the writing is finished the written material provides a basis for informed and focused in-class discussion. It also creates an archive of it for each student. This archive is richer, more extensive and possibly more complex than just notes taken in class. The Dialectical Notebooks are a particularly effective way of creating such personal archives, as they document the way a thought emerges, grows, and evolves. The traces of writing on paper are a manifestation of time needed for an idea to emerge and a map of the meandering route it may have to take a particular shape and form or gain depth. Having the process of the development of an idea documented in their notebooks gives students a deep sense of ownership of this idea.

Writing together and – even more importantly – writing with the intention to exchange ideas and answer each other’s questions is a source of respect and dignity. It forces the writers to take each other’s ideas seriously, to read them, and to engage with them actively through responding. Reading each other’s writing created through an exercise such as Dialectical Notebooks is different from listening to each other talk. When views, opinions, arguments, questions, and points are

already materialized on the page, they have a weight which is difficult to ignore or dismiss. Instead, these written interventions have to be acknowledged and engaged with.

Writing collaboratively also means that tutors write alongside their students. In other words, the person who sets up the exercise is also completing the exercises while students do them. This assumes a horizontal (not hierarchical) set of in-classroom relationships. It also positions students as the tutor's fellow writers. To think of my students first and foremost as writers has been transformative for me in my relationship with them. It is also something that speaks to my natural instincts to distrust and defy authority. In my classroom we are a community of writers and thus, equals.

By becoming a co-writer, by writing to the exact same prompts as my students did, I humbled myself. I was not the authority I pretended to be, or the students expected me to be. Rather, I was admitting my own unknowing, uncertainty, and hesitation about the topic, the answer, or the findings. I really liked the horizontality that co-writing practices created. It might be because I have always struggled with the theatrics and demands of teaching: the imposing lecture theatres with seats going up, occupied with students whose faces I could hardly see and me on a stage with a microphone behind a lectern. Some of this top-down lecturing dynamic tended to slip into my seminar teaching as well, where I had to make a conscious effort between making questions engaging and making it look like I didn't know the answers. Of course, I didn't know all the answers, but seminar-based teaching is a way of transmitting knowledge through discussion. I always had to be firmly in control of this process. So how did writing change all or any of that teaching dynamic which is firmly established at universities?

During my teaching career I found that asking students to work in groups or in pairs results in a better seminar interaction than just asking an open question to a group and expecting someone to come up with an answer to start the ball rolling. In groups or pairs students worked to answer questions without me being involved in the process and then presented them to the seminar group. I was there in the background participating but really the initiative was on the part of the students who were taking ownership of their own intellectual journey. In hindsight I realized that this method of working in groups came close in its impact to the one that the writing techniques had. By writing to prompts, students were creating their own answers and were encouraged to articulate them in writing. Sharing fragments of these written reflections in groups was the way for them to take ownership of their ideas which were already materialized on page. The white page or screen, a pen or a keyboard stripped learning to its essentials and made it valuable in new ways – for the students and for me.

I enjoy the way how writing has become woven into my practice and experience of teaching. I find the presence of many different threads of writing in the classes I teach to be reassuring and grounding. Writing practices anchor my teaching and give me and the students something tangible and material to hang on to. Writing is very hands-on in the way reading or discussing cannot be.

5 POWER OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OR WRITING FROM THE GUT

I came to realize that one of the reasons why I felt so alienated from academic writing was that I couldn't bring any of my personal experience into it. And even if I attempted to do that, I only managed to do it awkwardly and without any real confidence. I was a prisoner of texts with which I was expected to dialogue and which I found more and more oppressive. The Fellows Program created opportunities for me to bring in my (sometimes very) personal experiences into my writing exercises and to weave them into my process of writing. During the Fellows Program we wrote in many different spaces, in different countries and cities. We were sensitized to the spaces we inhabited and responded to them in our writing. Many times, we were asked to incorporate these experiences directly into our writing. I always felt it was done in the spirit of bell hooks for whom "everyday life was the site for transformation and change."⁷ I thus became reconfirmed in my interest in experiential forms of learning for students and in making them building blocks of their writing process.

There is not one type of exercise that I could present to you which is most effective in processing experience and experiential learning. However, I have an anecdote I wanted to share with you. It would be helpful to illustrate how spaces, interactions, and experiences both in and out of the classroom slipped into my writing. One of our weeklong writing workshops took place in Berlin. It is a place I know quite well and where I take a group of my students on an annual basis. Yet, this is also a place that I find very difficult for a variety of historical, political, and personal reasons that have to do with my Polish background. In short, I don't really like or enjoy Berlin. When we arrived in Berlin at the first writing session, we did a series of free writes on the basis of which we were asked to write a poem. My poem went like this:

German donuts are plump and fluffy
I don't like Berlin
But
I like their donuts - the only Polish thing they have. Homey
I don't like Berlin
It frightens me
It makes me anxious, scared, stiff
I drink a lot here
Go to the cinema – they say
Visit a museum – all of them in one day
Find the wall.
I can't. I don't. I won't.
Run away. To the garden. Away from here
American donuts are hollow.
You have to make them up to find the core.
To be surprised

We then were asked to work in a group to create our group talisman, a kind of a motto, or a keepsake which would guide us in our experience of the workshop in Berlin. We were asked to “condense our writing into an image.” Together with my fellow writers we came up with a picture made of concentric circles which created an impression of a shield. My personal talisman read: “Dorota is riding on the shoulders of Berlin bear.” The bear, as you may know, is the symbol of the city of Berlin. I intended to find ways of taming my fears and anxieties about Berlin with a pen and paper.

This experience of Berlin also acted as an uncanny trigger for dreams that found their resonance in my waking life. I had a dream about my Kyrgyz colleague, Begimai, who was showing me around her yurt. I had never been to a yurt or to Kyrgyzstan. I only knew Begimai professionally as one of the Fellows. The following morning at breakfast Begimai came down in a t-shirt with a drawing of a yurt on it. The coincidence was uncanny and striking, and of course it was not just a coincidence but rather a manifestation of something my subconscious was still struggling with and trying to work out. It spoke to my reflection of what home is, issues of belonging and maternal spaces. It was natural that the dream and the visualization of the dream were the subject of my personal Free Writing that morning:

I had a dream of visiting a yurt with Begimai that consisted of 11 rooms.
I remember wondering in my dream that I didn't know yurts could be so large. How could they even transport a structure of this size on horses? Was

it a permanent yurt instead? It felt like Begimai both lived in this yurt and didn't. The astonishing part was that this morning she came down to breakfast wearing a T-shirt with a drawing of a yurt being built. How do I even start making sense of these two events? Or does it need to be made sense of at all? The coincidence or the continuity between the dream and the waking state astounded me. It was like I had another life I was not conscious about where different conversations were taking place and different things were happening; like me visiting yurts. At times the two worlds collided or merged or revealed themselves in the most surprising ways.

And there was a conversation with Dan about Kyrgyzstan at a dinner last night.

This personal interlude, the imposition of my subjectivity, into the story of the Fellows Program matters more than it may appear at first. The experience of the program made me realize the importance of my own writer's subjectivity, in the process of writing. Again, I mean here any writing, including that which happens in the classroom setting and is scaffolded through the texts we assigned to students as part of the study. I began to actively encourage my students to bring their subjectivity, their "I," into the experience of co-writing in the classroom. I wanted that "I" to shape their engagement and response to texts. This subjective experience has a wide range. It may be as personal and granular as being drawn to a term, a fragment or a passage in the text. It may also be far bigger and more expansive than the text, and include some personal experiences, views, and ideas. All the written responses are at their core autoethnographic. They are all driven by the same nagging question: why am I interested in, drawn into, intrigued by this passage? The permission to engage in the act of this attentive, careful, and mindful listening to oneself was probably the most radical opening of all that the Fellows Program enabled for me personally.

6 WHO AM I WHEN I WRITE?

Why did I title this essay "from the CLASP notebooks of a mid-career humanities Eastern European woman academic in London"? It is such a mouthful. It somehow feels so awkward and may even be unnecessary. Overdone. Never in my entire academic career have I ever used such a title or subtitle for any writings or presentations. But this time I really felt compelled to spell out who was the person writing this piece. For the first time, I was bringing my whole self into my writing, and that

meant introducing all the parts of my identity that had shaped this experience. The subtitle was a way of introducing myself to my readers and offering them some coordinates to help them navigate my piece. The spark came from a call for papers for a conference of the Contemporary Women's Writing Association. They invited papers on all different types of contemporary women writing. I received this call for papers as an invitation to carve a place for my own writing experience and articulate it for the conference attendees. I had never been to a conference of this kind and was drawn to the specific focus on women writing. I was also full of doubts wondering if they would ever accept my proposal and, if they did, how the paper would be received. The nagging feeling of not being intellectual enough and theoretical enough came back to haunt me. What did I know about contemporary women writing or feminist literary theory? I was an impostor, again, trying to break into another academic chamber. Using all the labels to describe myself was a way to pre-empt any questions or hesitation about my legitimacy to engage in autoethnographic research about writing-based pedagogies. Talking about being an academic in London was the way to protect myself. But emphasizing the mid-career point and my Eastern European roots was about making myself exposed and vulnerable. Some of these characteristics fell in between being a marker of both strength and vulnerability, just like my being a woman and working within the field of humanities. I rarely experienced these in-between points as sources of strength. Rather they were something I felt I had to compensate for, in many ways, and repeatedly.

So, there was something quite desperate in this subtitle, in this string of identity markers. But this baring and vulnerability were necessary: in my autoethnographic exploration, I wanted to signal a shift in my professional identity, and an effort to dislodge something which didn't allow me to feel free in all these identities, but trapped by them. This was the starting point. What is the end point as we are coming to the end? The end point is that I wrote a conference paper, presented it and expanded it into this essay. The blockage was my thinking that there was only one way to be an academic and one way to write as an academic. The Fellows Program pointed me in different directions which gave me courage to start moving more freely among my different identities, to acknowledge other desires, and forge the ones I don't yet know. CLASP made me realize through writing I can create a dynamic and ongoing process of creating myself and discovering myself. So today, I would change the subtitle slightly and add "writer" to it.

7 NEVER PUTTING MY PEN DOWN AGAIN

I experience writing as an act of profound honesty and trust. I cannot write in any other way – it's the only way that's true to me. It's important to reflect – daily, through writing – on what writing does to us and to others. As I write about everyday matters, I ask myself: why am I writing this? Why does this matter to me now? It could be something mundane or complex – a point of struggle, tension, or resistance. To write through anything with honesty, giving it the time it needs, is to discover what writing is and how it moves through us. By living in writing, we inhabit an enchanted place. We can share it with others, but only if we choose to.

My talisman from now on is “Never Put Your Pen Down Again.” Ever.

NOTES

- 1 bell hooks, “Remembered rapture: dancing with words” in bell hooks, *Remembered rapture: the writer at work*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999, pp. 35–45.
- 2 bell hooks, “Remembered rapture: dancing with words” in bell hooks, *Remembered rapture: the writer at work*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999, pp. 35–45, p. 43.
- 3 bell hooks, “Writing from the darkness” in bell hooks, *Remembered rapture: the writer at work*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999, pp. 3–12, p. 3.
- 4 bell hooks, “Remembered rapture: dancing with words” in bell hooks, *Remembered rapture: the writer at work*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999, pp. 35–45, p. 35.
- 5 bell hooks, “Remembered rapture: dancing with words” in bell hooks, *Remembered rapture: the writer at work*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999, pp. 35–45, p. 37.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- 7 bell hooks, “Writer to writer remembering: Toni Cade Bambara” in bell hooks, *Remembered rapture: the writer at work*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999, pp. 230–237, p. 234.