CHAPTER 18.

WRITING THROUGH THE COMPLEXITIES OF CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHER EDUCATION

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I first met Anne Ruggles Gere on the pages of *English Journal* (*EJ*).

I was a high school English teacher working in a suburban district just down the road from the University of Michigan. At the start of my fourth year of teaching, I was struggling for direction in my career. I was also lonely. Yearning for opportunities to grow professionally, I read and annotated my copies of *EJ* in the bathtub.

Imagine my surprise when I came upon an essay co-authored by a professor in Ann Arbor, the town where I'd been living for the past two years. The essay was a conversation piece written for an *EJ* themed issue on veteran teachers. Titled "Teachers Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow: Learners Forever," it was co-authored by Laura Schiller, a teacher at Birney Middle School in Southfield, MI; Cheryl L. Rosaen, a professor at Michigan State University; and Anne. Together the three veteran educators discussed events and decisions that led them to their current positions while reflecting on their lives and the teaching profession.

I got my first sense of Anne through their conversation on the page. Aspects of the stance she would later take through all my experiences writing and learning with her were evident in that first textual encounter. She spoke of being a young teacher and having questions and uncertainties about the work that led her to graduate school. She recalled the community she found in the National Writing Project after she became a professor at the University of Washington. She testified to the importance of looking carefully at one's classroom practice in the company of other teachers—and the transformations, both personal and professional, that occur when one commits to continued reflection, professional collaboration, lifelong learning, and a willingness to change.

That essay was everything I needed at that moment. It paid tribute to the complexities of teaching at a time when I was grappling with the demands of the

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job. It validated my hunger to learn. It planted a seed.

Ten years later, after my own transformational experience in the National Writing Project followed by two summers in Making American Literatures, a workshop for teachers co-led by Anne, Don McQuade, and Sarah Robbins and funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, I had become a graduate student in the Joint Program in English and Education (JPEE) at the University of Michigan, and I was working on Anne's research team.

Anne had offered me a position as a graduate student research assistant with Teachers for Tomorrow (TFT), a School of Education program she created for prospective secondary school teachers committed to careers in urban and under-resourced schools. I joined Vicki Haviland, a postdoctoral researcher and JPEE program alum who co-directed TFT with Anne, and Christian Dallavis, a fellow graduate student, on the team. A Teacher Quality Grant from the U.S. Department of Education funded the program and our positions.

The focus of our research was teaching—specifically, the ways preservice teachers learn about culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and take up culturally responsive teaching stances. Under Anne's leadership, we published three articles focused on the challenges and complexities of CRP. Anne was lead author on our most ambitious piece, "A Visibility Project: Learning to See How Preservice Teachers Take Up Culturally Relevant Pedagogy," written for the *American Educational Research Journal* (*AERJ*), a flagship publication for education scholars. I became lead author on "Normalizing the Fraughtness: How Emotion, Race, and School Context Complicate Cultural Competence," published by the *Journal of Teacher Education* (*JTE*), a signature venue for the teacher education community. Vicki took the lead on "Making the Journey Toward Cultural Competence with Poetry," accepted by *Multicultural Perspectives*, a journal for practitioners committed to social justice and multicultural education. Each publication did its own distinct work for the field of education while also doing formative work for us as young academics writing and learning with Anne.

This chapter tells the story of those publications and the collaborative writing process that produced them. At the center of the story is Anne: research team leader, scholarly role model, and writing teacher. The same qualities that characterized her stance in the *EJ* essay—questioning, looking carefully at classroom practice in the company of fellow teachers, staying committed to continued learning, and being willing to change—resonated in the work of our team and paid dividends for our research. What the *EJ* essay does not reveal—and what this chapter seeks to highlight—is Anne's tenacity as an academic writer and her ability to foster the writing capacities of others.

Following, I provide background on TFT and our program of research. I give an overview of our three collaborative articles and the contributions we made to

the literature on culturally relevant pedagogy. I take a deep dive into the most ambitious of the three, “A Visibility Project,” recounting the rounds of revision required and how Anne led us through them. Looking across the publications, I trace themes in Anne’s leadership and lessons she imparted—about how writing gets done and also about what kinds of writing are worth doing in the academy. Our story has value for graduate students formulating research agendas, professors guiding research teams, and teacher educators with an interest in the complexities of CRP. At its core, the story is an offering to fellow writers—naming and sharing Anne’s teachings so they might guide others, as they continue to guide me.

THE TEACHERS FOR TOMORROW PROGRAM

Teachers for Tomorrow was as much a community as a credentialing space. Students applied to TFT after they were admitted to Michigan’s regular undergraduate education program. A shared interest in urban teaching drew students to the program; most also shared an explicit commitment to social justice. Joining TFT was a way to both receive special training and, implicitly, to signal a set of socially progressive values. Students planned to teach the core high school disciplines of English, social studies, math, and science. Most, like us, were white.

Students added TFT requirements to their standard certification courses. The program began with a one-semester course called Study Group, focused on critical identity work and the challenges and opportunities afforded by under-resourced schools. The next semester, students took Schooling and Society, dedicated to multicultural literature, culturally relevant pedagogy, and guided experiences in our partner school and the surrounding community. Vicki and Anne co-taught both courses. As liaison to our partner school—a Title I high school serving a racially diverse, small, blue-collar town—my job was to foster relationships, recruit guest speakers, and attend TFT class sessions to share the knowledge I was gaining through ethnographic fieldwork. Students culminated their learning with a student teaching placement at our partner school, complemented by a student teaching seminar led by Christian.

We collected extensive data during the four years of TFT with the intent to analyze how students learned the tenets of CRP in coursework and then enacted culturally responsive teaching practices at our partner school. The three articles that resulted from our research traced the challenges of developing and enacting cultural competence, one of three tenets of CRP as defined by Gloria Ladson-Billings.

Perhaps because we were acutely aware of our own whiteness, we prioritized cultural competence over academic achievement and sociopolitical

consciousness, Ladson-Billings' other two tenets of CRP. We saw our work as a response to the challenges posed by the "demographic imperative" of an increasingly diverse school population still being served by a largely white teaching force (Banks 24). Ladson-Billings' critique of traditional teacher education, where notions of whiteness are rarely interrogated, also resonated with us (96). Cultural competence, Ladson-Billings maintains, requires teachers to be aware of their own culture and its role in their lives, to take responsibility for learning about students' cultures and communities, and to use students' cultures as a basis for their learning (97–98). We placed these principles at the center of TFT.

We believed we could make a contribution to the research literature, where portraits of culturally competent teachers glossed over the challenges of centering culture in the classroom. Nowhere could we find accounts of the *process* by which beginning teachers developed cultural competence, so we made that our focus.

We were living the struggle with our students. Questions about their learning invariably raised questions about our teaching. We came to understand that in order to explain what we were seeing, both in students' coursework and in their interactions at our partner school, we had to turn the lens back on ourselves. Students' missteps and blind spots were connected to our own. The interconnected story was about the complexity of the work—what we came to call its "fraughtness."

THREE ARTICLES

A Visibility Project

Our research began in earnest the summer after the first year of TFT. Anne was particularly interested in students' work with multicultural literature, a signature element of the Schooling and Society course—and, we believed, one of the innovations of our approach to culturally responsive teacher education. We rooted our pedagogy in ideas from Michael Smith and Dorothy Strickland, who argue that reading multicultural literature can lead students to "adopt the perspectives of literary characters who are very different from them" and "begin to appreciate and perhaps even to apply those perspectives" (138). Smith and Strickland add that writing from someone else's perspective encourages students to focus less on their own experiences and feelings and more on the complex political and social issues raised in multicultural texts.

Working from Smith and Strickland's premise, Anne and Vicki devised an assignment series rooted in position-taking responses to literary texts including film, comics, memoir, poetry, and fiction that represented aspects of schooling

for persons from marginalized U.S. populations. Presented with a menu of choices, students were asked to write from the position of a character, a parent or student from our partner school, an investigative news reporter, or a teacher, and in the form of a nontraditionally academic genre such as a poem, letter, journal entry, news article, memo, or visual response. They were also asked to write a short explanation of the choices they made.

When our first round of qualitative coding revealed a significant amount of stereotyping—more than we had recognized at the time students shared their responses in class—the project and our research questions became more complicated. Racial identity work had been a central focus of both the Study Group and the Schooling and Society course. With this form of critical preparation, how could students go on to produce position-taking writing that was, at times, riddled with racial stereotypes? We had not accounted for the complexity of the CRP learning process and the role race played in our individual and collective work.

The research questions that ultimately drove our analysis focused on a concept we called "raced consciousness," which we defined as a way of seeing the world through race even when one is not consciously aware of race. Raced consciousness, we argued, refers to the pervasive lens that race establishes, even when persons are consciously trying to be antiracist—as were we, and as were our students. Our *AERJ* article, which began as an analysis of student writing about multicultural literature, turned into an exploration of how raced consciousness inflected the developing understandings of cultural competence of all TFT participants—preservice teachers as well as us, their white teacher educators.

Through longitudinal case studies of two students, and a data set that expanded to include admissions essays, journal entries, moments from class sessions, encounters in our partner school and the surrounding community, final poems, and exit interviews, we produced a lengthy and nuanced account of the race-based tensions that accompany attempts to engage in culturally responsive teaching and learning. Raced consciousness surfaced in the ways students positioned themselves in classroom interactions and interviews; it created in students a heightened awareness of how they were being read racially by others; it shaped students' responses to position-taking assignments and our interpretations of their work; and it shaped students' processing of cultural responsiveness. Our discussion section includes an account of how our own racialized views as white instructors and researchers shaped both TFT and our analysis in the study.

Normalizing the Fraughtness

We continued to collect data as new students entered TFT and earlier cohorts progressed through the program. We knew that in order to understand how students

enacted their understandings of CRP, it was essential to follow them into the field. When students from the second cohort moved on to student teaching, we identified a subset of focal students and made plans to follow their development by videotaping them teaching once a week. We paired teaching observations with weekly audio-recorded interviews where we asked them to reflect on their learning.

Dynamics at the school were complicated. Race was a frequent topic of conversation—in particular, racial division within the teaching staff. Some staff members described the school's culture as toxic. While some teachers described the experience of teaching in an under-resourced community as a privilege and a calling, others took a cultural deficit perspective towards students and the community. TFT students found themselves navigating a range of dispositions and belief systems along with conflicting advice from the school's teachers on how to manage issues of cultural difference. For TFT students who were white, their racial self-awareness created additional challenges and complexities: they wondered how they could be white and culturally competent at the same time. In a teacher education program where students framed their desire to teach as a matter of social justice, student teaching was inflected by a heightened degree of emotion. Being seen as successful with culturally competent teaching was tied to the identities they were constructing as social justice educators. Anxiety, insecurity, and fear threaded through the work.

We dug deep into the case of Kelly, which we found to be especially rich and compelling. Of the handful of student teachers we followed, Kelly stood out for her honesty and vulnerability. A preservice social studies teacher, she was placed with a mentor teacher who we believed to be among the best in the building. Kelly was smart, creative, deeply committed—and white. Drawing on my ethnographic knowledge of the school, Vicki's expertise with whiteness, and Christian's insights from the student teaching seminar, our coding led us to identify three factors—emotion, race, and school context—that frustrated Kelly's attempts to teach in culturally competent ways.

When we presented preliminary findings at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) conference, drawing from a data set that included videotapes, interviews, and Kelly's journal entries during student teaching, the response from attendees was strong. During our debriefing conversation in the conference corridor, we agreed that we had the makings of an article. We decided to target *JTE*, where Vicki had recently published an article based on her dissertation. Focusing on a single teaching moment from Kelly's classroom, we asked, what does negotiation with cultural competence look like for a white beginning teacher committed to working in urban and under-resourced schools? How do emotions, racial identity, and school context influence a white beginning teacher's negotiations with cultural competence?

Our close reading of that teaching moment and our discourse analysis of the ways Kelly made sense of it in the weeks that followed led us to an argument about the fraughtness of enacting cultural competence. Instead of a smooth arc of development, we wrote, the process of becoming culturally competent "is an arduous journey filled with forward movement followed by missteps and backsliding, followed by forward movement again" (Buehler et al. 416). Teacher educators, we maintained, "would be wise to focus not on the achievement of cultural competence, but rather on the struggle involved in enacting it" (416).

Making the Journey

As we continued our collective work on the *AERJ* piece and as Christian and I took responsibility for the *JTE* piece, Vicki envisioned an article for *Multicultural Perspectives*, a journal she knew from her work as a high school teacher. In the third year of the program, we developed a new final assignment for the Schooling and Society course—a poem in two voices that students performed on the last night of class. What would a thematic analysis of student writing in those poems add to our understanding of students' development of culturally responsive dispositions? Vicki wrote the article almost entirely on her own, but the framing and discussion sections reflected our pooled efforts and insights—one final instantiation of our collaboration.

The idea for the poem in two voices assignment was to provide a space for students to culminate their learning in the Schooling and Society course by focusing on the practicum component at our partner school. Each TFT student was assigned to a cooperating teacher in their discipline and paired with a student in that teacher's classroom. We charged them with getting to know their focal student in the classroom, the school, and the community. Writing in two voices, alternating between their own and their focal student's perspective, would both build on their experience with position-taking responses to multicultural literature and take them to a new place. Presenting their poems slam poetry-style at the end of the course, we believed, would heighten the stakes and provide a meaningful shared learning experience.

Anne recruited Jeff Kass, local teacher and award-winning slam poet, to come to class to lead a poetry writing workshop. We shared a sample poem in two voices that Vicki found through the magazine *Rethinking Schools*. Students had time in class over several sessions—drawing on their observations and conversations with their focal students—to draft their poems. When they presented on the last night of class, we provided them with affirming feedback and connected this culminating experience to their emergent identities as culturally responsive beginning teachers.

Once again, though, our analysis as a research team revealed a more complex story that belied our classroom celebration. Vicki's close readings reminded us that there are almost always nuances in student work that are not visible at first glance. While the poems included moments of critical self-awareness, we also saw continued stereotyping and occasional white saviorism. Students revealed detailed knowledge of their focal students, attention to social class differences, and an ability to see themselves through the eyes of others, but they also relied on heroic teacher narratives and were mostly silent on issues of race.

While our analysis focused on poems produced in just one semester, our interpretation reflected a research team conversation that now spanned four years. We had become steeped in shared language about the fraughtness of developing cultural competence through our work on the other two articles. With this piece, we were more prepared to center our claims about fraughtness. Given the nature of the journal and its audience, this article was shorter than the previous two—it stands out as the most accessible presentation of our research, focused on the power and the limitations that coexisted in a single assignment. We placed the lens on our students as well as on ourselves as their teachers. Analysis of students' work showed us, once again, the complexities of developing cultural competence.

WRITING AND PERSEVERING THROUGH THE CHALLENGES—WITH ANNE AS OUR GUIDE

The conference room in the JPEE suite in the University of Michigan School of Education was both the site of our writing and the site of Anne's teachings. Through leadership and example, Anne taught us how to collaborate as members of a research team and how to write for publication in academia. Threaded through these twin teachings were deeper lessons about effort and persistence, our individual and collective worth, ambition and humility, and who and what has value.

Our team met weekly and wasted little time on small talk. To work with Anne was to reckon with the expectation of focused, continuous, business-like effort. But talk was the essential ingredient in our success as a writing team. From our first summer meeting, when we discussed students' position-taking assignments and Christian shared a research memo that identified stereotypes in their writing, the bulk of our time together went to talk. How could we account for the gaps and shortcomings we were seeing in students' work? And, once we were aware, how should we respond—as writers developing articles for publication, but also as teachers?

Vicki had finished the program the same year I started, and Christian had started the year after me, so in my eyes, Vicki was the voice of authority, and

Anne was in charge—or so I thought. As the ethnographer in the room, I took notes on everything, which gave me plenty of space to listen while others talked. Over time I developed a heightened awareness of Vicki's willingness to challenge Anne. Vicki insisted that we weren't thinking enough about whiteness. She expressed skepticism when Anne said we should target our multicultural literature article to *AERJ* instead of *Research in the Teaching of English* as we'd first planned. Vicki thought ahead to next steps like applying to the University of Michigan's Institutional Review Board for human subjects research permission and what we should do for our next conference proposal. She set the terms for our research agenda.

Anne always listened and took up the thread from Vicki. As Christian and I gained experience, Anne listened to us as well. I knew our partner school better than anyone, and Christian became the expert on CRP. Vicki kept the university courses moving while Christian handled the fieldwork side. I fostered relationships and created handwritten transcripts of our research conversations as they played out in real time—often getting down the gist of the argument we would later make in writing as we spoke it into being during a meeting. We talked our way to clarity. On our team, the playing field was level. Each of us brought a crucial lens and, in time, an individual area of expertise. Anne cultivated our skills and our roles by valuing what we each had to contribute. She invested in us, imbuing us individually and collectively with a degree of authority that surprised me at the time, but that was crucial for our growth. We were novice scholars, relative to her, yet she expected us to have something to say.

The articles we published reflected our individual commitments and our collective capacity. No one else could have produced the work that our team did. It was emergent as we learned from TFT students, our school partners, and each other. It was a product of ongoing, frank, honest talk. Had we not developed so much experience and ease in our talk, we would have never coined the phrase about needing to "normalize the fraughtness" inherent in the development of cultural competence. And had we not figured out how to talk through hard things, we would have never gotten published in *AERJ*. The story of that publication is a final story worth telling.

A manuscript decision of revise and resubmit is normal in academia, so it was unsurprising when we were charged with revision after we submitted the first version, which we had worked on for a year and already revised once based on feedback from faculty colleagues in the English department and the School of Education. The revision the *AERJ* editor asked for, however, was overwhelming. The reviewers were brutal—pointing out gaps in our literature review, problems with our methodology, concerns about validity, lack of clarity in our terms, and the absence of member checking. One reviewer suggested we pivot from an

analysis of a set of assignments to case studies of individual students, which the editor encouraged. Another reviewer voted to reject the manuscript entirely. I read ambivalence in the editor's message that she had "decided" to give us the opportunity to do a major revision. But she went on to share a message about the value of our research, affirming that we had conducted "a study on a critical issue that could be of strong interest to the journal readership" supported by "an important and compelling line of inquiry that we hope to strengthen with this feedback" (Valli, 16 Oct. 2007).

For me, the magnitude of reviewer critiques made our work seem illegitimate. But Anne was undaunted. We pivoted to case studies. We drew from a broader swath of the data, extending the analysis and discussion beyond our initial focus on students' writing about literature. We submitted our revision six months later. This time the editor responded with praise for the changes but with another long list of weaknesses that included structural and conceptual incoherence, multiple large and ambiguous concepts at play, misleading claims, and a suggestion to delete the entire section on stereotypes and rewrite our research questions. What, exactly, were we studying, she wondered—CRP, responses to literature, or something else? She reiterated her message about the importance of our work: "Although I cannot make promises about publication at this time, the reviewers and I would not be spending this much time providing feedback on a manuscript that we did not believe had publishing potential" (Valli, 5 May 2008).

I can't speak for Vicki and Christian, but I was crushed. Again, the flaws in our manuscript, as described by the reviewers—who did not agree on what we should do next—seemed insurmountable. But I will never forget Anne's response. She was optimistic. And determined. "We're still in the game," she said. Her confidence and her fortitude were a wonder to me.

We submitted our third revision—which was actually our fourth draft—fully two years after our first research team meeting where Christian brought his research memo about stereotypes. Two months later we received a conditional acceptance pending one last round of revision that the editor herself would oversee. Even then, she presented a laundry list of problems, culminating with questions about the discussion and implications sections and telling us that the manuscript ended on a dismal note. What was the point, she wondered, of learning to see raced consciousness in ourselves and our students? What were the implications for teacher education?

In that fourth and final round of revision, which yielded our fifth draft, we all helped out, as was customary for our team. But in this final round, Anne did the heavy lifting. I remember being impressed—deeply impressed—by the moves she made as she rewrote the discussion and implications sections. At the end of this arduous journey, it was Anne who maintained a sense of the big

picture, a grasp of the field, and a degree of authority that exceeded what we could summon as younger scholars. She modeled not just perseverance, but intellectual daring. When the final acceptance arrived, midway through my final year in graduate school, we were jubilant. To celebrate, Anne had us over for dinner at her house. She even cooked the meal. I'll never forget her pride in our shared accomplishment.

As a writer, and as a writing teacher by example, Anne modeled the belief that clarity in the work would eventually come and that the best way to achieve it was through the hard work of returning to the writing desk. For me, it meant taking the transcript of our team conversation, preserved in my handwritten notes, and turning bullet points into a series of paragraphs at a coffee shop or my kitchen table with a preschooler watching videotapes of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* in the other room. After all, if Anne could go home after a full day of meetings on campus and draft a new section between midnight and 2 a.m., then I should be able to get something written when it was my turn.

Anne was the engine that kept our train moving. Her sense of fairness meant that all four of our names went on every publication, and the lead author was the one who had done the most work.

I remember all of these characteristics because they helped to form me. The legacy of our work can be seen in the citation record for our articles—which have indeed been taken up by other scholars, providing evidence that our research was good for the field. Talking to scholars on the pages of a flagship journal mattered, but talking to practitioners about pedagogy did, too. The richness is in the body of work as a collective, which parallels the richness in our team.

The professor whose words I first read in the bathtub became the mentor who taught me to believe in the value of collaboration and the transformations that are possible when you keep showing up—to write, to teach, and to learn from the process. The four of us were learners together—embracing the complexities of teaching, engaging in self-critique, remaining open to what was emergent in the research, and finding value in our individual and collective abilities. We were teachers, writers, and learners—transformed in the learning, shaped in the work.

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