



Hope St. John (HS):

Hello, and welcome back. I'm Hope and this is *Write For You*, the podcast from the University of Washington's Odegaard Writing and Research Center about graduate writing, how it happens, and what comes next. Together in open dialogue, we talk with graduate and postgraduate writers about how writing and revision is practiced, peaks, valleys, and everything else along the way. Listen in as we talk tips, strategies and clarifying moments, and maybe you'll even find something that sounds right for you.

In this episode, we'll be hearing from Anna and Safi, two doctoral candidates nearing the end of their programs. We recorded this conversation via Zoom, so there may be a little bit of quirky audio, but I think we're all familiar with that by now. Together, Safi and Anna talk writing, method, and finding motivating questions and commitments that have helped propel their work. It's an exciting listen, so I'll turn it over to them to introduce themselves and tell you more.

Anna Nguyen (AN):

My name's Anna Nguyen. My pronouns are she and her, and I am a sixth-year graduate student in the history department, and I study Vietnamese American political development from the 1960s to the early 2000s.

Safi Karmy-Jones (SKJ):

I'm Safi Karmy Jones. My pronouns are she her, and I'm a dissertating English Ph.D. in the English department. My diss is more like cultural studies and disability studies and critical race studies, and it's about the histories of intellectually disabled communities in America and the concept of intellectual disability as a fairly modern construction. And I'm also working at the Women's Center on campus. So that's me.

AN:

Should we get started with like writing habits or routines? Do you have a specific writing habit or routine that you do every day?

SKJ:

Yeah, I mean, ideally, yes. In theory, yes. In actuality, maybe not. And what I have realized is I don't get anything done unless I wake up very, very early or I stay up very, very late. And that's because in the early morning and the late evening, it feels like my brain is the least distracted, I guess. And I've heard that's common with people with ADHD, but yeah, I do that. And also because I'm very easily distracted by friends and I happen to live with friends, so I come home from work and then I see friends who work regular people jobs. And so they are done with work at five and unless I'm like very good about being like, "I can't talk to you, don't look at me," then I get distracted and it's nine o'clock and I've watched like three episodes of *Ted Lasso* and haven't done anything. So very, very early in the morning or very, very late at night. What about you?

AN:

It's a little bit similar to what you were saying that there's the ideal, right? So when I'm at my best, I'm awake early in the morning, I write for one hour or two, and I try to get about 200 and 250 words done per day, when I'm at my best. And I've found that if I elongate the time that I allow myself to write, I elongate the time it takes me to write, if that makes sense. So when I'm at my best, I try to write about 200 words in one hour. Then I call it done for the day, but I'm just so rarely at my best. So I can write anytime during the day, I just find that I'm most productive early in the morning, but the downside is that I'm not at all a morning person. So it really is me forcing myself into a routine for me to get up.

And what I found helped, like when COVID started, I had just finished my comprehensive exams and I was kind of in a very odd place when it came to like my work habit, just because I was on fellowship at the same time too. And a friend who woke up with me eight o'clock every single morning and we would just like Zoom together and it was good because we had that time to talk, but it was also just like a very generous gift because like she held me accountable for, I think, two quarters to make sure that I got some work done and got a chapter done. So that was very nice of her at

the time. And I've also found that much like doing crossword puzzles in the morning, if you write early in the morning, then your brain will think about what you've written for the rest of the day. And I kind of revise in my head or I try to work through a problem in my head for the rest of the day. So those are kind of just the benefits of early morning writing. But again, I don't do that every single day just because yeah, I'm not a morning person, even though I try really hard to be.

SKJ:

My chair said, like when I was asking her for advice, she said, "Just open your dissertation for 30 minutes. You don't have to do anything, you can just like read it over." And you usually start working like in those 30 minutes, and then if you are working, keep working and if you don't want to keep working, then you're done after 30 minutes. And I feel like it's a similar, like your brain has to stay in writing mode, which is so different than speaking mode. At least for me.

AN:

Yeah. I've had the same strategy too. Sometimes when I just don't want to work, I'll set a timer. Usually I exceed that 10 minutes because there's not a lot you can get really finished in 10 minutes, but it's just a way to kind of trick my brain and I feel like so much of dissertation writing is trying to trick your brain into writing. And I agree, that is a really good strategy just to kind of keep it low pressure and then see what you can get done. Do you have any kind of bad habit or like a writing crutch?

SKJ:

Yeah, I procrastinate. I don't know how I think time works. I think this is also something that I've read online that people with ADHD have a problem with is, like, understanding how long something takes. They either overestimate or underestimate. And so I procrastinate so bad. Like, I can't hate on my students for starting things the night of, because, like, I don't do that, but close. Sometimes I've been close. And it is hard because this past quarter I was working two jobs and so the time that I had to write was like directly when I got home and when I would get home, I would pass out. So that all just stacked up into this ball of procrastination that I'm dealing with today. What about you? What's your crutch or bad habit?

AN:

Procrastination as well. But when I write chapters, there's so much research I do beforehand and I never feel like I'm ready to start writing, right? But I found that if you just force yourself to start writing, then that actually helps you to focus what you're researching, right? So with my first chapter, I definitely did not feel ready to be writing it, but my advisor was like, "You need to get this done." So I would write for an hour or two hours in the morning, try to get 200 words done. And then I would spend my afternoon or evening researching so I could write the next 200 words the next day. And that really helped me focus myself. Again, that was kind of like best-case scenario for me. But it's like one of those things when you're dissertating that deadlines are real, but they also don't feel super real because there's not that class that needs to end in 10 weeks, right?

SKJ:

Do you teach too?

AN:

Yes. It's not like in the English department where we're like instructor on record. I'm a TA usually, and I've had ups and downs with TAing when it comes to writing. There are times when I've TAed and so say I need to be in class at like 10:30. I start writing at 9:30. I know that within that hour I need to do something, and it's usually in best case scenario, 200 words. But there are also times where TAing kind of just takes over my life and I just don't get any writing done. So it's been kind of a mixed bag in that case, but I imagine it's very different than what people in the English department do, which is that they are instructors on record.

SKJ:

I think our titles are still TAs. I don't know for sure, I should know this. I don't really know. I call myself a TA, even though I run the course and stuff. But when you run a course, especially writing course, that for me was good and bad because I suddenly came to realize that deadlines are largely arbitrary. And so that helped reduce my anxieties around drafts. It did not help me get them in on time, because I'm also like, "We're adults." And knowing exactly how I grade and how most instructors grade, I'm like, "You're not going to look at this for a week, don't lie to me. Like you're not even aware

that I sent it to you.” And so that's something I've had to work on is being like, no, you have to send it in. And so, yeah.

AN:

I totally agree. As an undergraduate, I always got everything done like down to the minute, even if it was the very last minute, but yeah. I mean, it is interesting because now that I am a grader, like you said, you kind of understand that there's some kind of flexibility there, but maybe that's not the best advice for undergraduates, that's true.

SKJ:

Yeah. So that's like the bad habit, but what is the best piece of writing advice that you've ever received?

AN:

I've gotten a couple and I, as a matter of curiosity, because I read a lot of fiction, I'm always interested in like what fictional authors writing routines are. Just because you are a huge fan of them, you want to know how they produce such great works. So I've read a lot about how fictional writers or essayists have written, and I would say some of the best advice I've gotten was there's this book called *Bird by Bird*, by Anne Lamott, I hope I'm pronouncing that correctly. And it's basically a book that's based on the story of her little brother when they were kids and how he procrastinated on a project about birds until the very last day of his summer vacation. And then he starts freaking out having all this anxiety and his father sits down to help him and to calm him down and get him to actually work and not just be anxious, his father tells him he has to go bird by bird.

And as someone who, when I go through the archives, I come back with a whole bunch of evidence and a whole bunch of documents and that in itself can be very overwhelming. And I usually repeat to myself when I try to get started, just go one document at a time, right? Go bird by bird. So that has been very helpful. The other writer who has been very helpful has been like Anne Patchett. And I actually read this before I even got to graduate school. She has this essay collection called *This is the Story of a Happy Marriage*, and it's all kinds of essays in there, but one of the essays was about her time as a, I think writing fellow at university and how she has found that what works best for her is not have any of these superstitions. And I

know that's kind of easy to say, but that's has been helpful for me as well to be like, "Even if I'm not at my best, I don't need the conditions to be met in order to be able to write." So that has kind of been helpful. And then like the most practical advice I've ever gotten, my advisor told me that every paragraph that I write should be around 250 words plus or minus 10. I'm kind of a rebellious person, so I gave myself the leeway of plus and minus 15. And at first I was like, "Wow, that is like such a strict guideline for a paragraph." But I found that limitation has kind of helped because every paragraph is one point, but I know I have 250 words to kind of express that point. And 250 words is about how much I can get done in a day.

So, say I break my dissertation chapter into an introduction and four sections. The first introduction is about five paragraphs usually. And then each section has about 10 paragraphs. So that's 45 paragraphs in a chapter. And if I do 250 words a day, so one paragraph a day, then I will probably get done in 45 days, right? So that's kind of a way of me sticking to a small goal that I try to do every single day in order to get this larger project done. Yeah. Those are the best writing advice I've gotten so far. What about you, Safi?

SKJ:

Well, so Hope and I actually went to the same high school and-

AN:

Oh.

SKJ:

Yeah. It was the Vancouver School of Arts and Academics, and it was an arts magnet high school, and we would have these things called showcases where we would show each other our art or artists would come in like performing artists, dancers, musicians, and we had themes every year. And so each of the showcases would usually correspond to the theme. And the first year I was at that school, the theme was Twyla Tharp. Do you remember that one?

HS:

I do remember that. Like, I remember that was the theme, I remember we had to read *The Creative Habit* – oh, and I think there was an opportunity to see one of her shows when it came to Portland, and that's the extent of what I remember.

SKJ:

That's basically what I remember too. And for those of you who are listening, who don't know, Twyla Tharp is a very famous modern dance performer. She like started her own school and stuff. She wrote this book, and the main message was that making art or being creative or creating things is a practice. It's not a production. So she was like, the thing that I do is just to do it every day. Like even if what you make is bad and you just have to do it every day. And so she talked about like setting up a routine and making sure that even if it was bad, she saved the scraps. And so I find myself doing that in that I try and look at my stuff every day. That's like the goal, but I also keep all of these scrap documents where I'm just like, if something is too beautiful of a sentence that doesn't make any sense where it is, I'll cut it and put it on the scrap document and be like, "it's fine." I don't have to fully say goodbye to it.

And so that was really impactful for my writing. And then the other piece of writing advice I got was from my advisor also. And she said, "You keep posing questions or you keep leaving these very open-ended statements. You have to answer them. Like, that is your thesis, you have to answer them right then. We can't guess what the answer is. You have to tell us." And yeah, I find myself doing that an awful lot. And my students this quarter in particular were doing it a lot, like being like, "So this paper will examine this thing and consider the different angles of it." And it was like, but what angles? What's the takeaway? So those were two pieces of advice that really stuck with me that it's a practice to create things. And then you have to answer the questions you pose. You just got to.

Oh, another piece of writing advice I got was from Kirsten Saxton. My advisor's name is Habiba Ibrahim. She's great, and people should check out her stuff. She writes beautifully. But my undergrad advisor was named Kirsten Saxton and she taught a very memorable class that I basically based my entire teaching persona off of. And one of the lessons that she taught in that class was – she just kind of randomly one day walked up to the board and was like, "When you're writing a paper, you're going to act like you're proposing a date to me, okay? You're going to say, 'we're going to go to sushi. We're going to go bowling after sushi. And then we're going to drive around the park and then I'm going to take you home,' and you have to stick to that plan because if you tell me we're going to go get sushi, but we go to the opera, I'm not wearing the right shoes." And what that said to me was that you have to set your intentions as a writer very early on and you have to do it very clearly. And then you have to stick to them, which is surprisingly hard because you get to the end of the paper. And you're like, "I didn't answer the questions

that I posed and I'm in a completely different place with the wrong shoes." So yeah, those are my top three.

AN:

I totally get that part about ending up in the totally different place. I feel like I do that sometimes too, when I like write a chapter and like, 30 pages later, I'm somewhere else. But then at that point, it's going back and revising those introduction plans, as you put it. But yeah, definitely. Also always tell my students, "You have to be more specific." Like, be as specific as humanly possible, especially when it comes to thesis, right? Because some students will want to surprise you and I don't know where they get that notion from, but I always have to tell them, "No, be very upfront about it in your introductory stages."

So, yeah. And I've also had students in the sciences who have told me, this is kind of what you do in the sciences where you tell all your evidence and then you state your thesis at the end rather than the other way around. So it's something that I've had to kind of make clear to my students that this is kind of the expectation in the genre in which they're writing, which is historical writing in my class. Yeah. Those differences are really interesting when you encounter them, especially as a new instructor.

SKJ:

So, I should have put two and two together that you include historical writing in your class, but I was doing a linked course with professor, Connie So's class, American Ethnic History 150. And I had TAed that class, so I knew the course material, but I was supposed to be teaching historical writing. And so one clarifying question that if you can answer it, I would be very grateful, in your experience what is the difference between academic writing and historical writing?

AN:

It's the way that you present and organize evidence, I would say that's kind of the main difference. As someone who has taken at least one or two English classes, I know that you guys work with evidence as well, but at least in my experience when I was taking English classes at the University of Washington by analyzing novels, right? So there is evidence there, but I feel like with history, there's just so many different variations that you can take from and kind of figuring

out how to mix that in a way that's intelligible is a difficulty sometimes. It's something you learn over time.

SKJ:

I used to be of the like ilk of English major where I was like, “The author is dead, de-contextualize everything.” And now I think that I'm exactly the opposite. And like originally, I think I was just teaching close reading and now I make my students write historical context and they do get very confused. I mean, I think that it took me until grad school to ask myself the question that I ask all my students now, which is, but like, why? Why does it matter? Like what are you specifically contributing to a field or an ongoing conversation? Like I love to string together all of the theorists that I assign them. They love Bakhtin for some reason, can't get enough of him. And they'll string all of these theorists together, basically in a report about whatever the class theme is. And then when I'm like, okay, but you just said that all these people argued this, what are you adding to their argument? That's really where they choke. But that took me a very long time to learn too though. So I can't – can't judge them for that.

AN:

No, it's very difficult. And I always tell my students too, like historical writing, it takes years for you to kind of even get the hang of, much less master. Like, I don't even know if I have that mastered, but you know, you have to start making that effort to answer like what you say, the why question, for me it's the “so what?” question. So, you can tell me that the author is arguing this by doing this, but then so what? What does that contribute or change the way you look at this history? So yeah, I know that this podcast has gone a little bit off the graduate writing and more into graduate teaching, but it's very helpful to talk to someone who is in the English department because history graduate students have so much awe for English graduate students because of how much you teach and how effectively you're able to teach writing. So, we always are trying to take pages out of your book and apply it to ours.

SKJ:

See, and we don't know how to find primary sources. So yeah, we don't know where the archive is or who makes it. So yeah, I was

reading *A Disability History of the United States*, and just like thinking about how much time it took her to find these scraps of evidence. And it's like from people that were just like legend essentially, and she finds these diary entries and like all this stuff, I just like sit with that book sometimes. And I'm like, "Wow, you guys do that."

AN:

Yeah. I would say like to give a quick thanks to are the archivists out there because historians really depend on good archivists for that. But I do agree, sometimes it's like you're chasing ghosts to the archives just because if you're trying to gather research about someone who is, for various reasons, not well documented, every single scrap feels like a piece of gold because even if it's just a scrap, you know how easily they could have been missed from the archives completely.

SKJ:

Yes.

So, I was asked like, if you read your undergrad papers, would you judge yourself? It makes me remember what I wrote like five years ago. I said, "Absolutely not, mine were fantastic." Now I'm like, what was I even doing? What was the so what? Like, yeah.

AN:

I would say that I wouldn't judge myself in undergraduate because there's only so much you can do in undergraduate, you know? I would say that I judge myself very, very heavily for my writing in my early time as a graduate student where I felt like this huge need to impress everyone and like say the most outrageous things.

SKJ:

Absolutely. Yes, absolutely. And in the most like complex way possible. And like, at least for me, I read that and I'm like, "What are you saying?" I agree, like early grad school is where I'm like, "Oh no."

You said you felt the need to like make outrageous claims. Do you mean like have like theses that just came out nowhere? Or what does that mean for you?

AN:

I want to say theses that came out of nowhere. I guess what I'm really reflecting on is... so I went from basically undergraduate

straight to graduate and then I was in a situation where I suddenly felt very dwarfed. So I think that I felt a lot of need to overcompensate myself. I can't say there was a thesis I had that was like completely unverified or anything like that. But I think it has more to do with like if I were to read my work from the early days of my graduate school experience, I think I would be able to read a lot of insecurity that's like on the surface there. And as I have progressed and learned more, not just as an academic, but also as a person, I think that I'm kind of more at peace with listening as much as I talk or even listening more than I talk. And yeah, I feel like a lot of academics when they look at their early parts of their career and like it's a little cringey, right? But I've learned a lot from it. I think that's what matters.

SKJ:

Yeah. I think that I now appreciate clarity and brevity so much and like using many big words does not make something smarter, for lack of a better term. And like circuitous, winding, flowery, academic essays are some of the least accessible things that you can read, and oftentimes because of how long it takes you to say something, you can get away with saying next to nothing. And so I feel like I read my stuff now and I try and be very straightforward, or as straightforward as I can be. And early grad school, I was just like, "You didn't need to say 'liminal space' there. You could have just said 'between,'" like and stuff like that. So that's what I judge early grad school me for.

AN:

Yeah. And I think that honestly, writing with brevity and clarity is so much harder. Like you said, because just comes to the question of like, who do you write for? Like you are writing for the community that you are also trying to add research to. And I feel like I'm kind of doing the same. One of the best compliments I've ever got when I was like presenting a paper at a conference was by another Vietnamese American who said that they wish that this history had been available to them when they were an undergraduate. And that's kind of the audience that I'm trying to convey it to, right? It just doesn't have to be to like the greatest scholars out there who are going to read my work. Who I really want to read my work are Vietnamese Americans who might not get the chance to go to graduate school or might not want to go to graduate school, but still want to see their history thought about and analyzed and shown. So yeah, I think that brevity and clarity and getting your point across in

a readable way is the best way to reach at least my audience, and it sounds like you're kind of in a similar position.

SKJ:

Yeah. I mean, it sounds like your work also has a lot of ground to cover. Like you're trying to do a lot of things and I feel like the stakes of my project have been clarified, I think maybe is how I would say that. And they are high. At least to me. And when you have very high stakes, I think in general, you don't want to mince words. And then also like, because I have just so much historical context now between all of the like cultural texts that I'm close reading, it lends itself to brevity. Because you can be like, "This thing happened and we can see it, like they wrote about it." And yeah, I used to wax poetic all the time and now I don't have time. Now I have like, you know, a bunch of documents to cover.

AN:

No, I totally agree. Also when you are working with a lot of documents, that can get very overwhelming I have found.

SKJ:

Yeah.

AN:

Is there a way that you use to like organize those documents?

SKJ:

I need a better way to organize these documents. I tend to have 50 billion tabs open, and so a lot of the documents that I'm finding are from digital archives and they're pictures or they're postcards or they're scanned medical records, and so I literally just have like 50 tabs open and will bounce in between them. I need a better system. So if you have a system of organizing documents, I would love to hear about it.

AN:

So when I first finished my exams and was starting to research my dissertation, I ran into the problem, I would find a really great piece of evidence and then I just never be able to find it again. So I started using like this free Zotero thing and it's basically just like a filing cabinet that you're able to put stuff in. And it's super helpful because you can tag stuff, right? So say that like you're following one specific

person through the archives can tag their name on all the documents in which related to them. I've also found it super useful for when I am writing a chapter I can go through and be like, this is everything relevant to chapter one that I want to use. And then I can sort it by date. Because like, you know, I'm a historian, I usually write stuff in a semi chronological order. I can set it to organize itself by the date that it was produced. And then I kind of know like, okay, so these documents that were in 1960 to 1961, I'll use that for my first section. So that has been super helpful. There's nothing worse, in my opinion of finding a really, really, really great piece of evidence and then just never being able to like find it ever again. That has really pained me.

SKJ:

Yes. There are multiple instances of quotes that really, like, changed the way I think about things and I don't know who said them. I don't know who said them, I don't know where they're from. Like, like, I don't know where I found them. So yeah.

AN:

I've also found like researching and COVID you have to become the best digital detective ever, right?

SKJ:

Yeah.

AN:

So that was really interesting writing my first chapter during COVID and just like having to obsessively, Google someone in order to like find possible sources I could get during the time on them. It made me feel very stalkerish because like, if you're a historian, you kind of also become a stalker of the archives. So there's that.

SKJ:

Yeah, I mean, I thought about that re biographers because one of the projects I'm doing for the Women's Center is I'm helping generate an oral history slash compilation of biographies of Asian American women activists in the Seattle area. And I literally was just scanning one of their papers. Like, they have a file of papers, like notes, memos, it's all at the library. And so I was literally just putting in a request for this woman's papers and then I got to go see her as she was like preparing for class and be totally normal. Like, yeah.

AN:

It's just like, you feel this weird amount of intimacy that the person that like you're researching does not feel, right? Like that person probably does not know you exist, if they're still living. And you're just like, "Oh. Yeah." When you actually get to meet them, but also pretty exciting because like there's of course like spots in the archives that are missing and then you get clarification.

SKJ:

Yeah.

HS:

Maybe let's jump into what you were talking about in terms of chasing ghosts through the archives and what do you do when you get stuck?

SKJ:

That's a great question. Like in terms of chasing the ghosts, what happens when they just go?

AN:

Yeah, that's... well, I've been kind of lucky cause I've gotten more than I thought I would on some of the people that I'm researching. But for instance, I'm writing about someone right now and a lot of the stuff that they did in, for instance, France, United States in the 1940s and 1950s is just not there. But so what I do is I contextualize the environment that they were in, so that the readers can understand if not what they were doing, what was happening during that time. And then I'll do that until I get reach a point where my archive it's a little bit more robust and I've been very lucky because this chapter really is about one man in the last like couple of months or so I found that the University of Washington's archives had more on him than I could even imagine, but there are of course still a lot of holes. So yeah, I contextualize the environment and the political situation he was in. And then I get to the point where I can finally talk about what he has left behind. So I would say that's what I do, but yeah. Can I ask what you do when you get stuck in a rut?

SKJ:

Yeah, I was actually going to say like a lot of the times I'm also dealing with basically like the lack of an archive specifically, like, for peoples who are believed to have intellectual disabilities or who have

intellectual disabilities. And it's because a lot of the times the text that they create, the cultural products they create are seen as skill building. Like, not art, not literature, not like self-expression, but as, like, fine motor skills or stuff like that. And a lot of the times in asylums, for example, they were thrown away. Like there's very little from the people who were in asylums that you can find. And so that archive is growing thanks to historians and thanks to archivists and stuff like there's this amazing article about songs that people would sing in asylums, and they compiled all these interviews with survivors and had them sing the songs and stuff and they included sheet music and stuff.

And I think that's so cool, but there's not a ton of that, and so when I hit a brick wall, what I've been doing is to just say the things that I don't know, because I think it's important for people to feel the loss of these people's lives, basically. Like we could have remembered them if we had valued their cultural output, but we didn't. And like there's a poem that I quote a lot from a poet with an intellectual disability, Barb Rabe, and she has a poem called "Beach Boys," and it reads like, "How about history and how about think about history? How about shadow? How about, think about shadow? How about, think about, listen to a poem? How about thinking about a poem? How about beach boys? How about having a person?" And I think that summarizes it really beautifully that like there's all of this stuff that we're never going to know, but, like, maybe if we can piece together just enough, we could have a person. Like, we could visualize or imagine a person. That tends to be my response to when I hit a brick wall, which I do often.

AN:

That's a gorgeous sentiment though. I feel like it's so valuable. And I think historians have to get better at this, to kind of express to the audience very clearly what you don't know or what you can't know, because like there's so much pressure on historians to, like, know everything about the subject that they're writing about. And as someone who kind of does a little bit research on trauma, there's some things that we shouldn't be privy to, you know? And I think that has to be a conversation that academics have a lot more, just because we want to do a kind of research does not mean that we are privy to everyone in ourselves, you know? So beautiful sentiment and a gorgeous poem.

SKJ:

That's such a great way to put that. I think that's something that disability studies helped me see is there is this pressure of academics being these disembodied knowers that know everything. And my students even don't know what to do when I'm like, "I don't know the answer," to them. But I can look it up. And it kind of sucks because that's the genre convention and people judge you, if you don't have that, if you don't act like you know everything, but it feels more truthful to not have to do that, and it's tough to negotiate those things.

AN:

Yeah, definitely.

So was there one piece of literature or reading that change in perspective on writing?

SKJ:

Honestly, *A Disability History of the United States* by Kim E. Nielsen, and it was a work of a historian that I respected so much because she put herself in it, too. She talked about how the stakes in her project changed when her daughter became disabled and how she had been researching it before, but when that happened, her whole view of the project shifted and she was just very much candid about who she was and why she was doing the project, and then she pieced together so many amazing pieces of evidence that I was like, whatever I do, I would like to do something like that. So that's mine. What about you?

AN:

I would say that one of the seminal work is by Yǎn Lê Espiritu, who wrote about, like, critical refugee studies and how we can look at refugees as not as a problem, but a paradigm to better understand different questions that we have surrounding like nationalism, nationhood, race, citizenship. So I think that was kind of a seminal piece in my writing. And honestly, she has influenced so many people when it comes to like critical refugee studies, but yeah, I would say that's one of the main ones that comes to my head.

SKJ:

I guess I should also say Lukács, which I don't mess with *Theory of the Novel* normally, but I read *Theory of the Novel* in undergrad and it was so beautiful, the way that he talked about literature, that at a certain point it made me cry and it was just like talking about the

notion of literature. So I guess that like, it helps me to remember why I do what I do because a lot of those guys were fleeing Nazi Germany and they knew that what they wanted to make sure that they did was finish this treatise on the novel as a genre. And it like, that's got to count for something.

AN:

I appreciate theory so much, but I've never been a theory person myself. I know that everyone does theory, right? But being able to pontificate about theory, like, that's something that I've never really been comfortable with, but yeah, I do kind of agree that you have that framework and then like the question becomes, okay, so what are you going to do with that framework, right? And like what happens if it doesn't match everything? Yeah.

SKJ:

Yeah.

HS:

I actually wanted to come back to the conversation about sort of working with theory, but also this larger question of like, so what? Why? And both of you talked about thinking about your early graduate work and sort of it not quite having that, the, "so what?", the "why?", and I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about how you got to the place you are now in terms of being able to see and prioritize that in your work, what happened that sort of triggered that shift for you in your writing?

SKJ:

I will very quickly take this and then I unfortunately have a meeting for my other job that I have to go to. So, just very quickly, I loved talking to both of you, A, and B, I started writing about something that I had to take home to people I cared about and who I was representing. I had to be accountable to the community that I was writing about, and everyone should be, but it was very explicit like whose feelings whose history and stuff were at stake. Because my little brother is nonverbal and on the autism spectrum and he's not intellectually disabled or cognitively delayed, but he is treated poorly because many people believe that's what he is. And many of his friends have various like learning disabilities and are also on the spectrum and nonverbal. And so, knowing that I had to take it home to them made the "so what?" a lot clearer.

AN:

I would say for me, it's when I started writing that it kind of became clear to me. Because before I started writing my dissertation, I feel like I was very critical of other scholars. And you know, in grad school we're taught to critique, right? If you're not always critiquing the books, then like you're not doing it right. But then I started writing and then after I started writing, I was like, "Oh my God, this is so hard."

SKJ:

Yes.

AN:

"This is so hard. I'll never critique a book again."

SKJ:

Yeah.

AN:

And then of course, as you write, you kind of clarify who your audience is and you kind of imagine them more in your head and like Safi was saying, you kind of start holding yourself accountable to them. So yeah.

SKJ:

Yeah. Creation overrides vanity, for sure. But yeah. Thank you both so much.

HS:

We've lost Safi, but I would love to hear your advice to your past self if you're willing to share.

AN:

Oh, of course. I mean, I think I was talking about this with like a couple of graduate students who are a few years behind me. I'm a sixth year, so I'm pretty far in my graduate school career. I kind of wish that – because when I entered into the graduate program, I felt so dwarfed, I kind of wish that when I was in seminars, I focused more on the collaborative possibilities of a seminar rather than the

performative capabilities. I feel like there's so much pressure and seminars to perform well and sound smart that we kind of lose what the point of a seminar is, which is to generate new ideas amongst each other. So if I go back to a younger version myself, I would say, "You don't have to know everything, but what you can best do for your own ability to learn is to really listen to other people in that collaborate with them, to generate new knowledge." So that's what I would say to myself, I think.

HS:

Yeah. I think that's a great sentiment.

And there you have it. Thanks for listening to this episode of *Write For You* and a big thanks again to our guests. On behalf of the Odegaard Writing and Research Center, I hope that this has been informative, affirming, and maybe even inspiring.

If you want to learn more about the OWRC, it's programs or services available to University of Washington faculty, students, and staff, you can find us online at depts.washington.edu/OWRC. In the meantime, for myself and everyone at the OWRC, happy writing.

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