Hope St. John (HS):

Hello! And welcome back to Write for You, the Odegaard Writing and Research Center's podcast on graduate writing. I'm Hope, your disembodied writing buddy and host for this brand-new season. Sit in with me as I virtually connect with current and former graduate writers from across the University of Washington to learn more about their writing processes, experiences, and how writing gets done. Who knows? Maybe you'll even find something that sounds right for you.

On this episode, we'll hear from Madalena, a seasoned graduate student who just wrapped up her first year as a doctoral student. Well-versed in translation and self-described as a writer to be. Madalena talks with us about process, confidence and learning to embrace her vision. I'll let her introduce herself and tell you more.

Madalena (M):

Yeah. Hi, I'm Madalena. I am a first year Ph.D. student here at the University of Washington in the geography department. My undergraduate, my bachelor's degrees are also in geography, so I'm definitely entrenched in the field. My general research interests are developing and adapting existing qualitative methods for the study of social media from a cultural geographer's perspective. So in not super jargony terms, that means that I am really interested in looking at the material aspects of culture online, so visuals, videos, that sort of thing. And looking at how we use those platforms to build community, to organize and to negotiate our identities. So, yeah.

HS:

Nice. Super cool. I'm really excited to be able to have you on the podcast because you bring this sort of multimodal interest and perspective, so I'm really excited to hear more about that. To get us started, I'd love if you could just tell me a bit about your experience as a writer, those background experiences and context that bring you to this place in your writing and in your process today.

M:

Yeah. So, I've always been more comfortable as a math and science kind of person. I've always been really good at replication and numbers and that sort of thing. I was very slow to even learn the English language. And so, writing was never something that I felt like was my mode of artistic expression. All around me, in high school, my friends were writing little short stories and enjoying our homework assignments and I had always loved to read, but I was really slow to uptake in the writing process. It wasn't until I got to college and I had a TA who was like, "You could just write the way you speak." And that was something that I'd always been more comfortable in, and I initially was intending to go into politics or into the bureaucracy. And so, I was much more comfortable preparing myself to speak and to talk about my ideas over writing them.

And so, that was possibly the greatest piece of advice I could've gotten in that moment. And he also was like, "If you're really comfortable with replication and equations, the way that academics write is sometimes very formulaic. You could just learn what that is and then go do it yourself." And that really helped me. I feel like I did that for many, many years. And it wasn't until I was working on my master's thesis and I had such a massive volume of information that I wanted to share. And I also... Most of my research is in French and then I present it to an English audience. And so, there's tons of translation and a lot of me sitting there thinking, "Okay. What did they mean and how do I represent that without overwriting people's actual opinions, but moving through that translation so that it still is making sense and getting the same emotional value?"

And it was really in that process that I started to break away from that equation and realize that not only could I write the way that I'm used to speaking, but that I could move beyond that sort of more formulaic understanding of writing. And this year has been a year of a lot of revision of papers and things, and that's also been a completely new process for me. And it's really allowed me to feel more confident in the fact that maybe I don't know the rules of the English language, but I'm at a point where I can just say that that's okay and get on to trying to communicate my work and communicate the work that the people I'm researching are as dedicated to as they are. Yeah.

HS:

Yeah, that's really interesting. So many interesting facets to that. The process of working between languages and trying to do that process of representation and all of the decision making that's part of that. I want to come back to that in a little bit. I also want to come back to this conversation about revision as well because I think there's a tendency to think about the writing process as just being about the process of generating writing. But in fact, so much of the work that we do is in that revision stage. So, that's also something I want to come back to. But first, I want to come to a question that is simple but admittedly kind of bloated, which is do you consider yourself a writer now?

M:

Yeah. You're right. This is a tough question to ask. And even when my friend said that she wanted to recommend me for this podcast, I kind of asked her, "Why would you do that? I'm probably the person who should be listening to this podcast." I would say maybe I am a writer to be, I feel very much in the process. At this point, I haven't had anything officially published outside of conference papers. And so, that's a silly, very traditional academic hoop to jump through and bar to climb over. But I do feel like, for me, those sorts of validations, sometimes I use them to stand on even if I can recognize their sort of arbitrariness maybe, but I'm an artist in other ways and I've started incorporating writing into that process as well.

And so, as I learned to intertwine those things more maybe, but I think if you were to say, "Come up with a word cloud of who you are." I'm not sure that writer would really cross my mind. Even though as an academic, especially on the humanities, social science side of things, you write a lot. But yeah, maybe soon, but not yet.

HS:

I like that idea of a writer to be. Even accomplished writers are still honing their craft, and so I like that is not a fixed claim, but rather is open-ended. I like that a lot. And this brings us into thinking about process, and what's that process like for you? I'm interested both in your writing process, but since you mentioned that you're an artist in other ways, I'm also interested if that creative process informs the

way that you write or vice versa. So, just tell us a little bit about your process.

M:

Yeah. It definitely has informed my process as I've moved from that more undergraduate atmosphere where I'm doing homework assignments, to writing for the purpose of sharing knowledge. I think that the pandemic, of course, has really transformed that process. And also, the way that I value the steps in my process, I'm definitely sit down at the edge of the cliff and think kind of person. And that's how my writing process starts. If I have a big piece that I'm working on, I'm going to spend days circling the topic and it doesn't look very active, it doesn't look very productive from the outside. But I've really learned that I just have to let myself do that. Otherwise, I'm going to get really frustrated and feel like I'm not getting anywhere and everything that maybe I get typed out or read is just not going to be as productive as that thinking period.

And that's something I've really learned from the other graduate students in my program, that it's okay that your time is just spent thinking and that as academics, that's actually a huge part of what we do. I have also always been artistically someone who liked to work very alone, very isolated, by myself, up at odd hours kind of person. And it's really, again, only been in the last couple of years that I've realized that that might be better for my writing process. I'm traditionally someone who likes to work in very busy communal spaces. I love a good coffee shop, I love coffee in general. But I've really learned, in finishing my master's thesis and now moving onto my PhD work, that sometimes I have to take that time to try and find a space that is isolated that's just for my writing time and I've found that to be hugely productive.

HS:

Yeah. Now, I think that coming to understand one's writing process or one's creative process in general is so important and sometimes it changes or sometimes you need different things. And that in my own writing and creative life, that's been something that took me a long time to learn. So, this brings me into the actual practice of writing. So, when was the last time you were writing? What was that like for you?

M:

Yeah. Well, I am very fortunate to have a fellowship this year, so I would say the majority of my time spent in the last two quarters has been writing and revising, which is lovely that I have the opportunity to do that. Definitely, not my usual pace. Usually, I feel like I'm more oscillating between teaching and reading and writing, and then also out there actually collecting data. Right now, I'm working on a paper that's for a seminar, but I'm already kind of angling it to be something that I want to get ready to send for publication as well. I'm building a little mini archive that is collecting all of the material online that has a certain level of engagement around a specific song. So literally, the last thing I wrote up was the methodology for that, and then just some general theoretical notes for some concepts that I already know will link into my analysis of the material that don't want to lose before I go and do the actual analysis and come back to talk about the material more in depth.

But yeah, it's been a while since I did a project that was hands-on like that, with actual data. Previous to that, I have been working on my preliminary statement, which is something that I know that not all departments do, but in our department, your first year of your Ph.D., you write about a 20 to 25 page paper that sets what you already know into large buckets. And then, between you and your dissertation committee, you identify where your gaps might be and get conversation going about what your interests are in your research and how you might go out and do it. Kind of as a getting to know you activity.

For me, as someone, again, who's been a geographer now for... I think this is my seventh year. That was a real challenge to write. Our discipline is very widespread, so there are a lot of things that I've read and know a lot in depth about that very much don't match up with my future work. And so, that was a huge project of whittling down, which is not my strong suit. My master's thesis was like 238 pages long. I'm definitely an over producer. And so, that project was a lot of me being like, "Okay, what's most important for me to communicate?" And I think that that's a really important and difficult skill to learn for academics especially.

I feel like we tend to be a bunch of people who are just so wildly interested in our work and what we have to say and what other people have to say that we tend to be lengthy, and learning how to be more parsimonious and more direct for the purposes of sharing and also for the purposes of publishing and those constraints, that's definitely something that I've struggled with. And in that process,

spent a lot of time trying to think about the removal of things as an intentionality.

HS:

Can you tell me a bit more about that?

M:

Yeah. So because geography is such a broad field, many of us own many hats. And so, first sorting through all of those and trying to figure out which big pieces of the field are important to my specific work, and then within those, which conversations are the most important. It's an odd document because no one's ever going to read this besides me and my committee members, but they're going to read it really closely. And so, it's this very intimate conversation that's trying to get at not only what I know, but what my committee members might be interested about in my work more theoretically. And so, it's really a different type of writing project where I was communicating to a very small audience.

HS:

Yeah. It's interesting that you mentioned audience and the fact that some of these documents that were asked to produce in graduate school, they have a very particular audience. They're not for widespread consumption, and that audience that we might be generally writing for is probably not interested in these more niche documents. So, that is in and of itself quite interesting and, I think, important to acknowledge. And the other thing that I thought was really interesting about what you said is how you go about actually starting to whittle down all of this information that you have in your head and thinking about the specific conversations that you want to be a part of or that you see yourself being a part of. So, I appreciate you going into a little bit more depth with us on that.

Another thing that I wanted to talk about was your work in translation and the process of that. And so, I'm wondering if you can talk a bit more about what that is that you do and what that process looks like for you.

M:

Yes. So, my main work has mostly been collecting data in French and then presenting it in English. So, that is a very traditional format of translation. I'm very fortunate that I speak French and have done so for a very long time, so I'm a little bit more comfortable than if you were, say, learning a language for the purpose of doing a study. But because my research has a lot to do with both social media and the forefront of a lot of feminist movements in France, there's a lot of me being like, "I have no idea what that word is, could you explain it to me or could you use a different one?" And so, having that translating moment before I go to do any sort of writing up, that process was hugely beneficial for me having to go back and sit with the material.

Not only did I have to transcribe in French, I then had to at least translate in my head to be able to code. And for my master's thesis, I coded in French and then translated into English while I was writing. And so, that way I was maintaining the concepts before they reached the writing process. But then, during the writing process, I also had to [inaudible 00:18:22] with the quotes and work through that translation so that they really fit with my writing because I was doing that process at the same time.

I've worked on other research projects where we transcribed in the language of the interview and then translated it, and then coded in English because there was multiple languages going on, and the only common language among all the researchers was English. And I also think that that extra step of having to then translate in English and then do some of the looking for key concepts and themes and things really brought a real proximity to the material for the translators. And I think that that process is a ton of work, obviously, and not everyone might feel confident in their skills to do that.

But I think that if you have the time and the money to be able to do that, the intimacy of being with the data that is so valuable. I know that it's my intention to do that again for my dissertation, and it might be a huge commitment upfront, but I think it saves you time and you're more writing up period of the process.

HS:

Yeah. It's interesting to hear you talk about the moments of translation and how having those moments at different points in the process kind of changed the way that you're engaging with that material. And I think also you mentioned something about how

sitting with the data at the necessity of having to work with the material also gives you this time to sit with it.

M:

Yeah. It's difficult, but I think translation can also be a point of joy and a point of learning. I learned so much about the ongoing dialogues about language through that translation process. I think that those processes of renegotiating what we think is culturally relevant to the way that we speak and the way that we conceptualize things like gender and race and things like that, I think that that happens more iterative culturally than it does in French in a way that I think is very foreign to English speakers because English is a language that is spoken in so many places, and so there's just not as much consensus about things. Where in French, someone gets an idea and it's maybe brought to a more official narrative, something that maybe the government even has a hand in. So, there are these really quick flips about the ways in which the language is used.

And I think that that is always a source of joy for me to see those things, even though translation can be a very sticky, dense process. But the third thing I wanted to mention about translation that I think is maybe a specific conversation to a language like French, but maybe people will find this interesting for their work as well. But I've been thinking a lot about the ways that in the United States we've romanticized the French language, and the politics of continuing to do that through my writing up. I'm a member of the Latinx community, and so I'm much more accustomed to hearing conversations about the translation between English and Spanish in work and the ways in which there are some words that we just don't translate because once they move from Spanish to English, they lose their culturally relevant definitions that are making those concepts into what we're actually talking about.

And so, I've been thinking a lot about that in French. I'm thinking about the standard practice of italicizing words in the language that you're not currently writing in and what that offsetting does visually. And whether or not that that's what I want to be communicating with those terms. I often end up leaving proper nouns of things in their original French spellings. And I think, in a lot of times for my work, leaving those things flowing straight through the English, maybe with a note of translation or a brief discussion about why I'm doing that, I

think is really valuable for trying to deconstruct the way that we romanticize the foreignness of specific languages. And I think that it also reflects the way that the participants in my studies talk about their work.

HS:

There's such a thoughtfulness in the way that you talk about your work and your writing, and I really appreciate that because I think that it's valuable to do that sort of reflection on the genres in which we're writing. Because as you said, so much of academic writing can be so formulaic, but I think that that sort of nuanced engagement is really valuable. And with that in mind, I want to pivot us into thinking about revision and the revision process. And so, I want to ask if you can maybe talk about the role that revision plays in your overarching process. And then, maybe if you can talk about the specifics of what you're doing in that process.

M:

Yeah, for sure. I think, one, revision is possibly both the newest piece of the writing process for me, and also I think the most difficult and maybe what I was always vaguely fearful of back in the day when I felt like I really didn't know how to write at all. And I mean, I think there's two times of revision, and the first one is so much easier. While you're in the thick of it, it's easier and it's more fruitful to make those quick pivots in the way that you've written something or what you've included. I continue to find revision just to be something much more inherent, and I feel like I have a whole system set up for that.

I have certain phrases and different color coding systems that I use so that when I've written something, that first round of revision is really easy. It's a lot of me just going back and slotting things in that I just didn't feel like doing at the moment, which I also think is a really important part of writing. If something isn't going well, put it in parentheses to come back and do it later. I use brackets a ton for that. Yeah.

Moving into that second round of revision where maybe you're trying to lift something into a different format or into a different audience or significantly change the word count, I've done a lot of that this year and I've definitely struggled with it. I have really found that your academic community, your relationships are really key in that later

revising moment. Not only because it's great to have a second set of eyes on things or just to be able to ask people if what you're saying is legible to the depth or breadth that you're looking for. But also, just in that more friendship way. As academics, we're all doing the same things, and it's great to be able to send someone a text and be like, "Oh, my gosh. I haven't been able to get anything done today." And for them to be like, "It's okay. I had the same thing happened to me yesterday."

And I think that that has really made that process of revision honestly just even tolerable for me. I think that those lateral relationships are really important as an even sophomore academic, let's say, to have. But also, your revision process is a really great moment to develop your relationship with your advisor and maybe some more of those more mentorship relationships. And I know that not every senior academic is going to cultivate the same environment as I've been fortunate to have, but being able to talk to, especially my advisor, about the nitty-gritty of revising has been so helpful.

And because they do this for a living, they catch on to those things that are maybe bad writing habits that you just tend to have. Everybody has them. That advice of how to move those pieces out of my writing, and especially how to condense things. Those have been really important conversations that we've had.

HS:

I mean, that's great to hear that you're having those fruitful conversations both with mentors and with your peers and colleagues. I want to circle back to confidence. How do you build confidence as a writer, or how did you build your confidence as a writer?

M:

Yes. I think it's something that's just sort of slowly built up. I wouldn't say I'm the most confident person. But I think at this stage, I'm confident enough that I can tell myself that we're just going to pretend everything's okay until it really is kind of thing. Fake it till you make it. But I think before maybe you have enough things to rest on, like I said earlier, I think that a lot of those more traditional modes of validation, honestly, were the way in which I realized that this was something that I could even do, let alone be successful at.

But yeah, I think a big turning moment for me was my second year of my undergraduate program. I got asked to be one of the presenting papers at an undergraduate conference internal to the university. And even to be asked to do that, I was like, "Are you sure?" But I think those little moments of outward validation were really key for me to be like, "Yeah. I can do this. I feel good about what I've written and other people do too." I think that was really key to get me to feel like this was something that I could choose as a career path or pursue as a career path.

It's not the answer that I want for other people to have to pursue. I'd love to give advice where I was like, "Yeah, one day I just realized that I could be a writer on my own, and I did it by myself. It came from within." But I don't really think that that was my experience. And I think that a lot of my lack of confidence as a writer also came from people saying that I didn't know how to write, and knowing that I didn't know how to spell things or what the rules of grammar were for things from a young age. I think that because of that, I really did need those more outward signifiers to get me thinking that maybe I could be confident in my writing.

HS:

Yeah. I mean, I think that external validation can be really useful sometimes, and it was. This brings me to my last question for you, which is thinking back to those experiences that you've had as a writer that have led you to be more confident, that have led you to being a writer to be. Is there any advice that you have that you think might be relevant to other graduate writers?

M:

Yeah. I guess I have maybe two-ish things to say. I, very fortunately, come from both a department and a discipline that is maybe a bit more open to the weird and to the non-traditional, but I think that writing doesn't just have to be this academic formula, and there's so many amazingly valuable ways to both produce and communicate knowledge. And I think that, as graduate students, this might be a moment where you might have a little leeway to explore some of those things that maybe down the line during your tenure track, you might not be able to if that's the direction you go from here. So, enjoy your time to maybe write a little bit more artistically and think about that process critically about what you can be doing now.

The second thing is that I keep a document with every project that I just call trash, and it's something that my master's advisor told me to do. She did not tell me to call it trash, but I think of it as the trashcan, right? If you were writing physically in your notebook and something just wasn't working or didn't fit, you could rip it out, crumble it up, throw it in your trashcan. And in a physical world, you could go and pick it up. And I think when you're writing digitally, deleting things can be really nerve wracking, and very rarely do I take something from my main doc and put it in the trashcan doc and then later go back and get it. But just having the safety of being able to do that, I think, has really helped me be able to focus my writing. And also, maybe let go a little bit and work on perfecting this one product without jumbling it up with all of the lovely ideas that you have going on at one time.

HS:

Yeah. That's a great tip.

M:

Yes, it's partially stolen. Or gifted, perhaps.

HS:

Gifted, I think.

M:

Yeah.

HS:

And there you have it. Thanks again for listening to this episode of Write for You, and a big thank you to our lovely guest. 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, its programs or services available to University of Washington students, faculty, and staff, you can find us online at depts.washington.edu/owrcweb. In the meantime, for myself and all of us at the OWRC, happy writing.

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