



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 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 Renee, a brand-new Ph.D. graduate from the Department of English. With her dissertation behind her, Renee talks with us about how she finished it, the importance of community, and what comes next. I'll let her introduce herself and tell you more.

Renee Lynch (RL):

My name is Renee Lynch. You can call me Renee. My pronouns are she/her. I'm a fifth year Ph.D. student in the Department of English, and I just finished a dissertation on my research, which is entitled Decolonizing Collaboration in English Language Teaching Teacher Identity and Tanzania.

HS:

Congratulations. Very exciting.

RL:

Thank you.

HS:

To get us started, I would love it if we could hear a bit about your background as a writer and whatever that means to you.

RL:

Yeah. Thanks for asking. Yeah. It's a really great question to be asked about my background as a writer, because I think it's taken the entirety of my Ph.D. time to kind of see myself as a writer, and I've definitely vacillated back and forth between writing focus and reading focus throughout the time in the Ph.D. program. So it's cool to have ended now thinking of myself as a writer, but my background in writing has been mainly informed through my teaching. I have a master's in Teaching English to Speaker's of Other Languages, also known as TESOL, from the English department here at UW. And so through that I learned about teaching writing primarily to multilingual students and has been also teaching writing, primarily academic writing through community colleges and also here at the University of Washington in the program for writing and rhetoric. And for myself as a writer, I've mostly been focused on writing this dissertation as well as a couple of academic articles here and there.

And most of those articles have been collaborative, so that's been an interesting process to think about. And in my writing of my dissertation, I had been thinking about myself as a writer in the sense that I wanted to write differently than a lot of the academic writing practices or received wisdom that I had been informed by, had been sort of preaching. I wanted to write in a way that was narrative based, that was sensory, that could move people's hearts. So I've been trying to do that in the most recent writing of my dissertation, which has been drawn from ethnographic research about my collaboration with a group of English instructors at a university in Tanzania.

HS:

Yeah. That's super interesting. What drove you specifically to want to make that intervention of being narrative and sensory based in your writing?

RL:

Wow. Yeah. That's another great question. Thank you for asking. I think primarily my interest in decolonizing work, when I say decolonizing, I am referring to the process of acknowledging and uprooting coloniality, which are these habits of mind and behavior that keep in place hierarchies around race, gender, nationality, power hierarchies, which have structured our world. And so when I

think about applying that to the practices of research and then to writing about research, I think a lot of what keeps those things in place is this idea that knowledge is somehow objective or value free as well as research knowledge as well as research.

And so I wanted to both do research and then also write about it in a way that could make myself a character in my own stories, but also present the research process as a series of events which happened, which I was there for, other folks were there for. We interacted. We came to common and sometimes very different understandings of what we were doing and who we are in the space. And so I wanted to write in a way that could reflect all of that complexity and nuance and uncertainty, but then also I wanted to communicate that in a way that could move people, that folks could read, and then hopefully have an emotional or some other engaged type of response to be able to then spark reflection for themselves and how they operate in their relationships across difference wherever they're at in life, and be drawn in to that same type of reflection that I also wanted to be doing through my own writing. So yeah, that's a little bit about where that came from.

HS:

Really interesting. I love hearing about the ways that different people approach writing as a kind of method in itself. I think that a lot of times we talk about writing as a sort of vehicle for ideas, but I think that it's often more a part of the work than a conduit.

RL:

Yeah. I think especially in terms of ethnographic work, I've been thinking about ethnography as not only a methodology, but also a way of presenting your findings, and I'll put that in air quotes, but yeah, writing is so much a part of ethnographic work and how you kind of work out your ideas or get them into a form that they make sense to you. The writing is a form of sense making.

HS:

So what did your process look like as you were doing that sense making?

RL:

Yeah. Well, I'll use the metaphor that my advisor, Suhanthie Motha, in the English department, who is just a fantastic person, also a really inspiring writer, she very supportively offered me this metaphor, which really reflected my experience and also process. She said it's like you're paddling a canoe into a foggy lake and you're in the middle of the water and there's fog all around you, and you don't know where the edges of the lake are, but you're just going to start paddling because you know that the edges are there. And so you're trying to find what is the shape of this lake, where are the edges, but you know, you just have to keep paddling basically. So I found that very comforting because I think the experience was really just a lot of uncertainty and kind of grappling around with what is this data saying?

The data that I was working with was mainly interviews and that I had done as well as field notes for my time being in Tanzania and also being here in Seattle and interacting electronically with my participants and colleagues as well as key documents from the university that they're at, as well as the literature, so it's kind of trying to braid all these things together and having all of them out in front of you. I did do a more traditional qualitative data coding scheme where I was looking for general things that were interesting and then trying to put those together into codes and then looking how the codes interacted into themes, and then trying to figure out what of these themes is interesting to me, so it was a lot of writing to make that happen.

Just starting with this is what I saw, or this is what happened to me, which was another piece of advice from Sue was just to start writing stories about experiences or things that had bothered me or confused me, or in a feminist sense of using emotion as a way of knowing, kind of letting emotions direct my focus. So writing stories was really important, particularly about emotionally charged moments and then trying to weave those stories together and fit them into the themes. And then I'll say the first chapter that I wrote for my dissertation was really kind of formless. And so then the next step was eventually revising that in a major way with new information that I had, but also a new focus that had come from writing another chapter, so a lot of revising as well.

HS:

You mentioned a little bit ago that a lot of your work has been collaborative and that your article writing in particular has been mostly collaborative. So I'm wondering, while we're talking about process, if you could tell us a little bit about what working collaboratively has been like for you.

RL:

Yeah. Writing and collaboration or writing collaboratively has been so different in each context that I have worked in. It's sort of mind boggling how different it can be. In some cases, I have written most of the content of what has ended up being published as co-authored, or I've written the first draft and then someone gives me intensive comments, and then I write a second draft, and then others give fewer comments, and then I revise. So that's kind of one model of doing it. And other ways that I've written collaboratively, it's been on the phone with someone typing in a document, kind of finishing each other's sentences or listening and typing at the same time about what they're saying or what I'm saying, which is definitely a more intensive version of writing collaboratively. I've also done it where I've written in a dialogue format with a colleague where we wrote it like a script basically, a conversation between us, and it was at time synchronous, at times asynchronous, but we still had distinct voices.

Yeah. So it's just been really different, and I think it's been interesting to note those differences and think about them not necessarily as a right and a wrong or like I like this, I don't like this, but leaving space for the many different ways that collaboration can look. And also thinking about the bigger picture of that collaboration. That's something that my colleagues in Tanzania have often drawn my attention to is this dissertation that you're doing is a very small part of our larger relationship. We met each other in 2015 and we work together then and we intend to keep working together after this.

And so if there's any frustrations or discomfort to things that I have around this dissertation, something that they often remind me of or expand my horizons on is like this is about the relationships and thinking about the relationship in more of a reciprocal sort of way. You know? Like perhaps I'm putting more effort into this now because then later other people will contribute in other ways. You

know, so it's just interesting to me to think about these different ways that collaboration can look, and again, not judging each collaboration, but zooming out whenever possible and thinking about the wellbeing of the relationship before the work.

HS:

Yeah. It's so interesting to think about the ways in which a collaborative process really pushes us to think and to write in different ways. When you were working on your dissertation or on any of these other writing projects, did you ever struggle with knowing where to start?

RL:

Definitely had some blank page syndrome, or not even a syndrome, you know, it's just a fact of writing. Yeah. I think in that first chapter writing experience that I was just talking about, it was definitely paralyzing to think, where do I even start with this? You know? Because there's just so much uncertainty. I can't understate that. I imagine that that's the case for most people in particularly qualitative research. But just trying to figure out, what am I saying? Also, the whole dissertation thing, what is a dissertation chapter? Is there a structure that I'm supposed to follow?

You know, I could look at other people's examples, but I felt like I needed to make my own sense of what is a chapter trying to do. Yeah. But I will say stories definitely helped me out of that. And also keeping a research journal where I could dump any thoughts or stories or strange or interesting things or funny things that had happened throughout the course of my research, and I could save the information there. So I actually used that also as an important source of data for my research, but also as a lower stakes blank page, because it was mine. It wasn't like the official blank page of my dissertation. So I also found that as a helpful way to write my way out of the fear, you know, the imposter syndrome and all the stuff that comes with staring at a blank page and holding it and being with it for a while before you can take baby steps out.

HS:

Yeah. So you've just completed your dissertation, which is such an accomplishment, and one of the questions that that immediately brings to mind for me is how did you do that? More specifically, how

did you ensure that your writing practice throughout that whole process was sustainable in a way that allowed you to be able to produce something of the size and scope of a dissertation?

RL:

Oh. Yes. I also wonder that for myself, like how did this happen? Because there were times where I felt so unproductive or so overwhelmed, or this thing that I'm writing, it's not answering my research questions. You know, like all of the negative thoughts that can take up that space when you're feeling anxious also and a recovering procrastinator. So it can be bad vibes for sure, but yeah, how did I make that happen? A couple of things, one, having a quarterly plan. This is also something that Su Motha had recommended, and there were some resources, and they talked about the importance of having a quarterly plan where you have a set of goals that you're working towards. So for example, at the end of this quarter, I want to write two chapters for my dissertation, which is a lot. I wouldn't recommend that as a goal, but having that end goal and then week by week sort of plotting out what you're going to work on each week, or for me having a quantifiable goal of like this week, I will write five pages.

Even if I didn't meet that goal, which often I didn't, because writing often doesn't happen in that linear sort of way, like I did my five pages and now next week I'll write five more pages. Usually it was sort of in fits and starts of like, oh, I've written nothing this week, and then the next week I might write two pages, and then the week after that I might be 12. You know? But having that planned out for myself of this is the direction I'm headed in, was really helpful every quarter. So one, plan. Two, having community was so, so helpful. I have two different groups with classmates of mine, one of which is a classmate and I we started actually before COVID in 2019, we would meet up in the library for two hours every week. We would verbally tell each other what we're working on and our goals. We would work for two hours, and then at the end of the two hours check in with each other like how did it go?

You know, give each other support. And then during COVID, we transitioned to a Google document where we did the same thing. We started with what's bringing a joy right now, and then what is your goal for this time, which is a really helpful way to bring some lightness to the whole situation. And we still do that. This classmate graduated, moved across the country, but we still have our dedicated

two hours of work time each week where we meet on this Google Doc. And then I have another group that I've worked with a combination of the Google Doc system and also in person, and that's two classmates of mine who are in different stages of the PhD program, but it's a similar idea. You know, we're working at the same time, so it kind of keeps you, I want to say accountable, but I don't like that word. I guess it provides support so that we can keep each other moving.

And even if you're distracted during that time, it's an excuse to come back and not think like, oh, well this whole afternoon is gone because I just wasted half an hour looking at my email. When you're with a group of people, it's like, okay, everybody else is still working so I can come back and still try to do at least 30 minutes of my own writing or whatever it is. And then other things that have helped, I think just having the overall motivation of I want to communicate this experience to other people and thinking about, there are plenty of other folks like me who grapple with the same questions of an English language teaching as white, so-called native speaking folks from what are called "inner circle countries" like US, UK, places where the English is valued more than the English is of other places.

How do we participate in the field of English language teaching in ways that are ethical and responsible and recognizing who we are, but also being in relationship with people who are othered in that field. And I think that those are deeply personal questions that I have, but I also know that there's a whole, again, a community of people out there with the same source of questions and challenges, and so keeping that motivation really close to my heart. I want to be communicating with that people and telling them about the experiences that I'm having or thoughts that I'm having about them and the goal of contributing to that conversation so that we can work through that together.

HS:

Yeah. When you're writing, do you imagine yourself in conversation?

RL:

Do I imagine myself in conversation? I wouldn't say in conversation so much as maybe writing something that is like things that I've read that have really connected with me. You know, when you're reading an article or you're reading part of a book, and there are parts that

just reach out and grab you, like, yes, I understand. You know? And it could be something about a particular detail or a certain phrasing of words or something, so I think about writing things that are authentic to me, but also that are open in that way of sharing the good and the bad in ways that can speak to people.

HS:

Yeah. So one of the discussions I hear around me a lot right now is about what the dissertation becomes. Some people write a dissertation and they want it to become a book, whereas some people write a dissertation and they never want to write a book. And so I'm wondering, where do you land in all of that? What happens next for you and for all of this work that you've spent years of your life doing and putting together?

RL:

I think now I actually do want to write a book. I've come out of it thinking, yeah, yeah, I want this to be a book. It's like those books that I've read, I'm thinking of books *Buying Into English* by Catherine Prendergast, and she wrote about the state of English language learning in post-communist Slovakia. And when I read that, I thought, oh wow, this is, first, really great writing, secondly, so useful. You know, like this could be a book that could be used in classes about English or economics or political economy. Yeah. So having inspiring examples and being like, I want to do that. You know?

I want to create something like that. And I will say, that's not how I started. I actually came into the Ph.D. program thinking that I wanted to write a play like a one woman show from my dissertation work 'cause I was really interested in the idea of performed ethnography or performance ethnography, you know, a way to reach wider audiences, but also kind of get at those highlighting the subjectivity of knowledge kinds of things that I talked about earlier. So as time went on, I sort of moved away from that goal. Also, before the PhD program, I tried to write a one woman show and did a staged reading of it, and it was terrifying. And I thought, okay, I don't think I actually want to do this, but I love the idea. So I think right now, having a book that is personal and engaging is sort of a goal that fits better for me given those same principles.

HS:

That's so interesting. So do you have a background in performance and stage work?

RL:

Yes. Yeah. I was a theater major, theater and anthropology double major, which made me extremely employable, as you can imagine. But eventually found my way to English teaching for, you know, a real job. But yeah, no, I've been interested in performance for a while. I perform improv comedy around Seattle, so that's how I stay connected to my performance hobby.

HS:

So you're used to thinking on your feet and improvisationally. Did you ever struggle with writer's block then? And if you did, how did you pull yourself out of it?

RL:

Yeah. I definitely had, I don't know if I would call it writer's block, but I think just periods of deep exhaustion and burnout, really. And I think part of what helped was people around me like my advisor, Su, or friends labeling it burnout for me, because that brought some deep compassion to it. It was still hard for me to accept, you know, like I'm not getting joy from my work right now. I don't want to do anything. I just want to be on a couch and read BuzzFeed articles for four hours, you know, whatever it is. So recognizing that maybe that's what was happening, that I was tired and needed to rest and needed time away. Again, I had a really hard time doing that because I think part of what's hard about being a Ph.D. student, 'cause you are your own project manager, and so there's always that feeling of like I should be working on this, I should be working on this.

If I don't work on this today, then I'm going to have to do more tomorrow. You know like, and again, it can get very negative, very punishing at least in my own head. And so I imagine that's a case for other people. So yeah, definitely taking breaks, allowing myself to do things that were fun or life giving. Like last summer, I was in between trips to Tanzania and really wanted slash needed to write a chapter and was having a super hard time with it. That's when the foggy lake metaphor came out. 'Cause I was like, Su, I don't know what I'm doing and everything is terrible. Who am I? So anyway, last summer, some things that I did for self-care were making sure that I went

kayaking every Friday either down at the IMA waterfront or Agua Verde, and it was like a routine thing where Friday afternoon is work is over, I'm going kayaking.

And also making time for friends and social connection, you know, not cutting that part out of my life. Because often I would feel like, well, that has to go. I can't justify having coffee with someone when I have so much work to do. But holding space for those sorts of things because those are what give you energy. You know? Thinking about yourself as, I don't know, having a bucket and your energy is going out of the bucket, there also need to be things that refill the bucket because once you get to the bottom, there's nothing left. You know? So you need to replenish, connect with the things that remind you of who you are, remind you of what's important to you. Knowing that when you're getting low, those are the things you need to add to your life in order to keep you at full so that you can continue, so just, yeah, self-care type of stuff.

HS:

Yeah. Self-care is so important.

RL:

And also it's also commercialized and capitalized and racialized in really ugly ways. So I think it's really important that everyone knows for them what counts as self-care, which could be different from other people and different from what social media tells you it is.

HS:

Yeah. Definitely. So I've asked about writer's block and we've been talking about burnout and some of the more negative experiences that come along with the process of writing, but I also wanted to ask about those things that make you happy as a writer. What are those things that you enjoy about writing?

RL:

I think I'm happiest when writing stories, honestly, because I find that when I write something, it's really juicy, something that feels alive both while I'm writing and then after I read it. You know, I think there's a feeling that I have when I write a session and I think that was good. It's kind of like the feeling of making something really

delicious and taking a taste and being like, yes, I got it. You know? Or that was good. I surprised myself. You know? So for me, that comes from stories, things that have happened that are really thought provoking or really funny, but maybe have a deeper edge or meaning to them. And so I would definitely encourage folks to think about ways that they can incorporate a story or narrative or bits of themselves into their writing like that. Your writing doesn't have to be stripped of who you are. There are ways to bring your own flavor to your writing.

HS:

Yeah. I think that's great advice. And that leads me really nicely into my final question, which is about what you would like to underscore or pass along to any graduate writers that are listening.

RL:

I think that I've touched on this throughout this, but I wanted to say again explicitly how important community is not only in terms of writing and approaching these really huge amorphous writing tasks like a dissertation, but also in keeping you sustained or sustaining your practice of writing and also sustaining you throughout the academic and intellectual challenges of doing that work. But also I find community has become extremely important to me in terms of my research and how I'm thinking about my research. I was interested in the role of identity and how my colleagues and I interact with each other. And at the end of my dissertation, I started using this term identity and community, which is a very different way of thinking about the self than I feel like I've been trained to think of myself in the Western or American or global north context.

And I think of identity and community as like seeing yourself as part of a social whole or seeing yourself and your relationships with other people as markers of wellness or wholeness. You know, that wellbeing and community wellbeing also contributes to your own wellbeing. So there's that sort of reciprocal or kind of blurred relationship between self and community, which is what I was trying to get at with the identity and community label for it. Because I think in my research in general, that has just been so clear to me of how none of what I do would be possible without the help of this group of instructors in Tanzania, but also the staff and the department that they work in. All of the people around me in Tanzania who support

me and help me out when I need it. All the people here who help me out, who cheer me on.

And so, yeah. So I think that I would encourage people as writers, but also as academics to not forget or not put on blinders to the communities that you have around you. I think it's easy to feel alone or feel like you are the one doing the work, or you are the one who has to solve all the problems or have the answers, which I think is not the case. I think it's a matter of unlearning the context in which most of us have grown up in in order to embrace and honor the community, and also think of yourself as contributing back to it in the same ways that they're contributing to you. So I think that I would want to highlight that for other folks to say, you are not alone. It's something that I've had to remind myself of a lot throughout this process. Like I'm not alone even in those times when I do feel very alone and just remembering that there's this whole group of people out there who you're standing on their shoulders. You're standing on the shoulders of giants in order to make your own work possible.

HS:

Yeah. I think that's a fantastic place to close.

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.

Write for You is a podcast by the University of Washington's Odegaard Writing and Research Center. This episode was produced, edited, and hosted by me, Hope St. John. Music by Scott Holmes, and Unheard Music Concepts and used under Creative Commons License.