



2015

Literacy Narrative

Kiki Petrosino

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Recommended Citation

Petrosino, Kiki. "Literacy Narrative." *The Iowa Review* 45.3 (2015): 1-6. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.7639>

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Literacy Narrative

I wish to put my blackness into some kind of order. My blackness, my builtness, my blackness, a bill. I want you to know how I feel it: cold key under the tongue. Mean fishhook of homesickness that catches my heart when I walk under southern pines. And how I recognized the watery warp of the floor in my great-grandma's house, when I dreamed it. This is what her complaining ghost said: *Write about me.*

I try to write about her. I try to write about her.

Where did my blackness begin? In Virginia. With an African woman called Rachel and her wedding to William Henry, half-English, half-Cherokee, who wouldn't let his red hair be photographed. It began with some land, and their house, which survived as a dark ring of chimney stones I once visited. It began with the bodies of Rachel and William Henry, two silences, buried in the lozenge of earth they owned.

But that is not how my blackness began.

I wish to put it into some kind of order. Ashes, oyster shells, my mid-Atlantic bones. My grandmama at twelve, walking away from the farm in Virginia, leaving the little Negro school that only went up to sixth grade. *I wanted to go to the seventh grade so badly I don't know why.* Grandmama at fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, alone in D.C., attending school and answering ads for "light girls" to clean houses, to watch children. She wore her plain blue uniform dress while serving dinner to the white family whose children she also watched. Grandmama and her college diploma, her government job, her pleated skirts and gold circle pins, years and years on her own.

I try to write about her. I try to write about her.

My blackness smiles out from my skin, a friend. Here are my narrow jaws and coiling hair. My color I've described in poems as "a high and disagreeable gold." It is a friend, it is a friend. You can't help but reach out for my blackness, like the white woman poet who once patted her palms down my hair, laughing, "I've been wanting to do that." As if she'd finally allowed herself something sweet and rare. So I forgave her. Part of me likes being looked at, being recognized. It's just as my PawPaw would say of himself, "I'm a good color," and sit in the front row for group portraits at the War Department. We have portrait after portrait of PawPaw in his business suit, pale pocket square, brown smiling face. A good color.

So I show up, at eighteen, on the foremost riser for my university choir performances. So I get a solo. So I drink orange juice on Jefferson's Lawn with my choir friends, and bits of the Lawn lift themselves on Charlottesville breezes and drop into my cup. I drink Charlottesville like medicine. I stalk the libraries and lecture halls no one built for me, and my blackness shows me a flickering host through the colonnades: kerchiefed women carrying laundry, servants with horses, the cooks and carriers of firewood. How will I live up to them? I wish to offer something. I wish for my blackness to be fully known here, to resolve into some kind of order. But I have no basket name, no communal experiences beyond the Latin hymns I learned in Catholic school. Back then, I still press my hair, pull it back.

So I pass by, quickly.

In graduate school, I don't know how to measure my blackness beyond the marks I make on the page. Those marks are black pixels, the smallest physical points I perceive on my screen. Only late do I feel it, my blackness, livid and living. The word *afro* appears in a poem and my professor suggests I delete it. He asks: *Who are you really addressing, in that moment?* And: *Is this a political poem?* It feels, to him, like a trick. As if I've drawn a silver coin from behind his ear. The poem changes when marked by my blackness, I learn. My readership splits, and some leave me. I imagine my readers gathering their coats, turning up their collars against the single raindrop released by the storm cloud of my blackness in a poem.

I don't delete anything. I write two books of poems.

The first time I read Junot Díaz's *New Yorker* essay, "MFA vs. POC," I feel nothing. I don't recognize myself in the crisis he describes. "That shit was *too white*," he says about his experience as a Cornell graduate student. "In my workshop we never explored our racial identities or how they impacted our writing—at all. Never got any kind of instruction in that area—at all." Consider the two em dashes that stab those sentences; they contain entire landscapes of silence and pain. But I don't connect with any of that the first time I read the essay, or the second.

Instead, I return to memories of UVA, to the "History of Literatures in English" survey required for majors. There are hundreds of undergraduates in the hall; latecomers have to perch on the steps leading down to the lectern. Junot Díaz's *Drown* is on the syllabus. It's the first time I've encountered his searing voice, and I admire its complexity, how the narrator of "How to Date a Brown girl, Black girl, White girl, or Halfie" simultaneously winks and weeps at the broad stereotypes and subtle, unwritten codes that animate his social world. Díaz's narrator situates

himself within a dynamic network of urban American cultures, a youthful “insider” who attempts, with braveness and vulnerability, to navigate all terrains, all languages, all “girls.” Being able to write across worlds like this—with irony, authority, humor, and tenderness—feels like a superpower to me. I, who have never lived among people of my own complexion or felt like an “insider” in any place, devour Díaz’s prose as much for its craft as for the *information* it contains about communities of color. It makes me jealous. It makes me want to write.

But while I dream of becoming the kind of author whose work ends up on a university syllabus, it never crosses my mind that I could *study* with Díaz someday. My entire education has taken place in predominantly white schools, in white towns, with white teachers. I never have a professor of color for any subject until I arrive at the University of Chicago for my first master’s degree. After I graduate and begin my MFA program at the University of Iowa, I never have a teacher of color again. Like Díaz, I’m aware that I’m one of the few POC around the workshop table, but at that time in my artistic life, asking “Why don’t we talk about our racial identities in workshop?” is like asking why the oceans aren’t filled with orange juice. They just aren’t. We just don’t.

So, I go ahead and have a happy MFA experience. Having left no community of color behind, living in Iowa is not a hardship for me, not even a little bit. In Iowa City, I experience my first sharp little inklings of belonging to a community of like souls. I attend readings so thick with people their joy drifts like perfume over the assembled chairs. Eventually, I start to read from my own work. People actually stop me on the street to compliment my poems and encourage my projects. I learn that this is no dream; it’s just how Iowa Citians roll. The staff of the local independent bookstore greet me by name when I walk in to buy armloads of contemporary poetry books. I do nothing but read, write, and fall in love. After graduation, I stay in Iowa City to work at the International Writing Program for four years. Every single day in Iowa, I get to talk with writers about books.

In his *New Yorker* piece, Díaz explains his unhappiness in workshop this way: “I was a person of color in a workshop whose theory of reality did not include my most fundamental experiences as a person of color—that did not in other words include *me*.” If you had shared this quote with me ten years ago, I would have replied that I was trying, through my writing, to formulate my *own* theory of reality as a student poet. But the truth is, I didn’t think I had any “fundamental experiences as a person of color” to begin with. Having grown up between the black and white cultural worlds (and, therefore, as a stranger to each), it took me

years to value my own life as “fundamental” to any definition of POC “experience.” The last thing I wanted, as a graduate student, was to feel pressured to write poems about racial identity (*Is this a political poem?*). Instead, I wanted to be “free to experiment with language,” across a variety of subjects, just like my white classmates could. In this way, I sidestepped the vital conversations I should have been conducting with my blackness.

Every so often, I would meet a new graduate student of color, just arrived in Iowa City; they would confess their shock at the *whiteness* of the place, so different from Brooklyn, Los Angeles, and D.C. I always felt distanced from this sentiment, actually struggling to understand how something like that could impact anyone’s happiness and productivity in an MFA program. *Being successful here is up to me*, I thought back then. *It’s my responsibility*. That’s how deeply I’d absorbed the conventions of what Díaz calls “the unbearable too-whiteness” of graduate school: I thought that working through my cultural isolation on my own was a virtue. Iowa nurtured me so well as a technical artist that, for most of my time there, I didn’t get around to nurturing my blackness.

Once at Iowa, I submitted at least one new poem every Wednesday for two years. The dominant pedagogical approach to workshop privileged the effective deployment of craft elements over the poet’s expression of “experience” and “identity.” Certain poets were exalted in multiple seminars, while it took me years to discover other voices, just as vital. We read Wallace Stevens, for example, to learn his philosophy of creativity. Through his poems, we studied how to construct metaphors without relying on “like” or “as.” We learned from Stevens how to make poems whose unique structures arise from the urgency of their “occasion.” I loved these poems.

Outside of class, I bought a used copy of Stevens’s *Collected Poems* and encountered the fifty-part epigrammatic meditation, “Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery,” for the first time. My heart hurt at the title, even as I learned through further reading that it was Stevens’s way of referring to the disjunctive, eccentrically concatenated structure of the poem itself. He saw in his poem’s form—with its assemblage of fragmentary thoughts—an aesthetic similar to the “litter” of mementos crowding African-American cemetery grounds in the 1930s. Still, the casual cruelty of the epithet stung me. And I wondered: has anyone else seen this poem? I wanted to know how a poet capable of lifting me from my seat with beautifully surreal images of “red weather” could plunge me back into the blind narrows of a racial slur. And how, as a poet of color whose

ancestors are buried in some of those cemeteries, I should reconcile these two effects.

But I didn't talk about any of this in workshop. Why would I?

Now my blackness walks to school with me, to the edge of the university campus where I teach. We pause beneath Louisville's seventy-foot monument to the Confederate dead, and we both look up, into the glinting mustache of the bronze infantryman balanced on his granite pedestal. An unfinished civil rights monument called Freedom Park leads away from the infantryman. A wooden pergola shelters the names of activists from half a century ago. Sometime soon, they say, trees will be transplanted here from the battlefields at Antietam, Chickamauga, Shiloh.

I don't believe my poetry can redeem the past. There's no poem I can write that will give voice to voices lost to time, or reverse the ruptures made by centuries of violence. When I write, it's my voice. This is how I sound when I'm speaking to you. I know it's not enough, but I offer it in this moment. My poems have been praised for "scout[ing] a new path" through difficult material, for addressing heartbreak with humor. Always, I'm aware of the generations of sorrow that preceded me. I don't have the power to erase that sorrow, but I can write about it.

As a poet of color, I work to make my art a worthy thing. Because I'm not worthy, just lucky. Born in freedom, walking across campus and into my day's labors. I borrow any book I wish from the library, and I buy more books with the money I earn. When I sit down to write, I can choose any theme among themes. I don't always write about my blackness; sometimes I talk about spaceships, or breakfast. I write what pleases me. Still, my blackness is there, in the very language that threads itself across the screen. It's in my literacy and how I feel it: a gift of threads.

How does it feel to write my blackness in a poem? Like practice. Like mashing the pads of my fingers against guitar strings, making the shape for G until G hurts. And often, it feels bright and huge, a room without walls I step into. My listening room. My library. Where I can be with other poets who speak the many languages of blackness. I've found my way into this room, at last, and I want to share these discoveries with my students *now*, while they're young enough to make these names part of their personal canon. For my students, I fill my arms with books. For them, I turn page after page. At school, I teach Evie Shockley's *The New Black*, Thomas Sayers Ellis's *Skin Inc.: Identity Repair Poems*, Camille Dungy's *Suck on the Marrow*, Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard*, Shane McCrae's *Mule*. I tell my students, I tell myself: *Pay attention to what these*

poets are doing with the sonnet. Look how they break open received forms. Listen to the music they make, how a poem that demands social change can be beautiful at the same time. How it should be beautiful at the same time.

I'm no master of order, of music, of blackness. But I'm learning to hum in millions of intimate keys. In my poems, I wish to share my blackness with the world, but it's personal, too. When I write, my great-grandma, Alverta, enters the room with her sadness and her cat-eye glasses. Her name sounds like a hairpin bent back on itself. She tells me about the big-city dreams she failed to catch. I want to say that her voice resembles mine, but it doesn't. Alverta is Alverta. I pour her a cup of coffee, but she won't take off her coat. So that's the beginning.

Write about me.