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Elizabeth Boquet

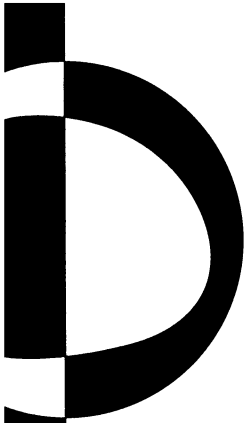
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Elizabeth Boquet

“It’s All Coming Together, Right Before My Eyes”: On Poetry, Peace, and Creative Placemaking in Writing Centers

I accepted the invitation to give the IWCA/NCPTW keynote¹ in Orlando with more than a bit of trepidation. People are serious about Disney. They know things. I...do not. My first and (until my return for the conference) only trip to Disney World took place in 1986, when I was in college. I travelled with my then-boyfriend and his family, and the trip involved a caravan of perfectly restored '57 Chevys, all headed to a classic car show somewhere on the grounds. I don't remember exactly where.

I do remember that, before the week was over, my boyfriend's father and his business partner in a vintage car restoration shop had a fight, an all-out brawl in the parking lot of the Hilton hotel. I had never seen two

1 This keynote was delivered at the joint conference of the International Writing Centers Association/National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing (IWCA/NCPTW) on October 31, 2014.

men rolling around on the ground before—at least not two men I was associated with—and I remember feeling confused and mortified and, somehow, weirdly implicated. Since then, I’ve been to Orlando dozens of times, arriving by air to visit family in Daytona Beach, an hour east, along the Atlantic coast. I take the tram from the terminal, pick up a rental car, skip Disney, and drive along I-4 East to the coast. Along the way, I pass the exit for Sanford, Florida.

Sanford, Florida, made headlines as the town where an unarmed 17-year-old high school student named Trayvon Martin was shot and killed in 2012, but it was notorious for racial violence long before that. Sanford was dramatized in the movie *42* as the city that ran Jackie Robinson out of town during his first training camp, but before that, Sanford was home to Harry Moore, the founder of the first Florida chapter of the NAACP. Moore was a public school teacher and civil rights activist who died on Christmas night in 1951 from injuries sustained when a bomb went off in his home. His was the first murder of an NAACP leader of the civil rights struggle (Wynn, 2009, p. 275).

I realize this is an unexpected, unorthodox place to begin a keynote given in the magically manufactured space of Walt Disney World, at a conference that took as its theme “The Wonderful World of Writing Centers,” but we begin where we are. And, try as I might, this is the only place I could start.

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“In the world of imagination, all things belong.”

—Richard Hugo

★

In “Writing Off the Subject,” Richard Hugo (1992) says, “Don’t be afraid to jump ahead. There are a few people who become more interesting the longer they stay on a single subject. But most people are like me, I find. The longer they talk about one subject, the duller they get. Make the subject of the next sentence different from the subject of the sentence you just put down. Depend on rhythm, tonality, and the music of language to hold things together. It is impossible to write meaningless sequences. In a sense the next thing always belongs. In the world of imagination, all things belong” (pp. 4–5).

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On April 25th, 2014, I arrived at Cathedral Academy in the early afternoon, along with nearly a dozen other Fairfield University students and faculty, for the culminating event of our Cathedral Academy/Fairfield University Poetry-in-Schools project, a celebratory reading of poems from the project's chapbook *Ripples on the Water, Poems in My Heart*. Cathedral Academy is a high-need elementary and middle school in Bridgeport, Connecticut. We had been partnering for over a year on a six-week poetry series that included fourth- through eighth-grade classes led in imaginative writing exercises by a team of Fairfield University advanced poetry students and professors, writing center undergraduate and graduate tutors, and first-year writing students. As I entered the multi-purpose room—stage festooned, student artwork strung, kids buzzing—I learned that one of our participating teachers had been called home, to Milford, the town in which I also live. “Because,” her colleague explained to me, “of the lockdown at Jonathan Law High School.”

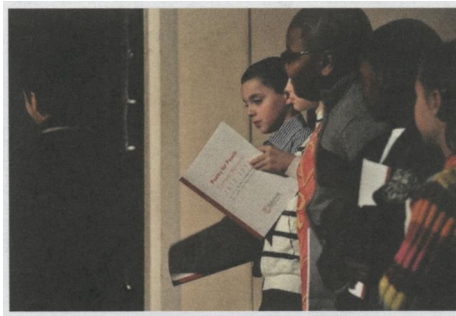
I had heard nothing of a lockdown, even though my husband is a police officer in Milford and Jonathan Law High School is both in our neighborhood and in his assigned patrol area. I quickly checked my phone. No reassuring text. (“Bomb scare. False alarm,” for example, is an all-too-common one.) No missed call or voicemail. I spotted an empty folding chair on the perimeter of the room and sat to do a quick search of breaking news in Milford. Up popped a grainy photo of a smiling dark-haired young woman trying on a turquoise formal gown. *Stabbed in the hallway, just before the start of classes, the morning of her prom. Additional details as they become available.*



Maren Sanchez, Facebook photo

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The Poetry-in-Schools project is an extension of a Poetry for Peace contest that Fairfield University has sponsored, through the Writing Center and other partners, since 2008 as part of the University's Martin Luther King commemoration programming. That contest invites K–8th grade students in the Bridgeport and Fairfield school districts to submit poems written in response to the prompt, "What does peace mean to me?" We regularly receive well over 1000 submissions, with entries from nearly every school in both districts. Over time, we wanted the program to be more and do more; so, with funds transferred to the Writing Center budget line and a collaboration forged with a new poetry colleague, Carol Ann Davis, we set out in search of district partners.



Poetry for Peace poets prepare to take the stage, January 29, 2013.

Fairfield University stock photo

As we culled the Poetry for Peace rosters for repeat (and successful) teachers, planning outreach even as we planned that year's event, our first and unanticipated district partnership emerged, in the town where Carol Ann's young children are in school, 25 miles from Fairfield's campus: Newtown, Connecticut, where on December 12, 2012, 20 children and six adults were shot and killed in Sandy Hook Elementary School.



Photo credit: Shannon Hicks, Newtown Bee, December 12, 2012

For six weeks in the spring of 2013, we met on Monday evenings at Hawley School, the *other* elementary school in Newtown, though workshops were open to all third-grade through sixth-grade parents and students. Leaping poems, table poems, bubble poems, place poems. As the weeks progressed, poems cross-referenced each other, players appearing as characters in each other's writings; parents, children, and friends composing collaboratively. The title of the resulting collection, *In the Yellowy Green Phase of Spring*, is taken from one of the collaborative "table" poems, a guided writing exercise whose first line begins "From here, I..." and whose subsequent lines, all but one, are kept hidden from the other writers as the unfolding lines of poetry are passed from left to right, writer to writer. This title line (like all the lines in the table poems) can't be ascribed to a particular author. It belongs to us all. Here is its poem:

The Great Unknown

From here, I can see the world
We are in the yellowy green phase of spring
Birds fly in the sky a lot during spring
Some people like to write in a journal
I like to write about flying birds
My cat, the fluffiest cat in the world, purred softly on my lap
I saw the flag at the front of the room jerking like a
 chained bulldog
The umbrella flew open as the wind took it
I wish I could wake up with a few less unknowns



Mother and daughter: Victoria, left, and Po Lau

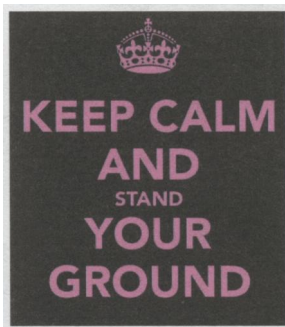
Photo credit: Eliza Hallabek, Newtown Bee, May 13, 2013

The Cinderella Castle is the iconic landmark of Disney World. It is 189 feet tall, built so that it can be seen from everywhere inside and many places outside of the park. In this way, it is not so different from the medieval castles on which it is modeled architecturally and which could be spotted rising out of the countryside, serving as both a statement of the lord's wealth and a warning to potential intruders.



Retrieved from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cinderella_Castle

The Stand Your Ground laws that have received so much attention since the shooting of Trayvon Martin have their origins in the fortress mentality reflected and made manifest in these castles. In fact, the Stand Your Ground laws are extensions of the law known as the Castle Doctrine, “a common law doctrine stating that an individual has no duty to retreat when in his or her home, or ‘castle.’ ... Stand-your-ground laws, by comparison, remove the common law requirement to retreat outside of one’s ‘castle,’ allowing an individual to use force in self-defense when there is reasonable belief of a threat” (Randall & DeBoer, 2012).



Retrieved from: <http://www.keep-calm-o-matic.co.uk>

Gated communities, human traps set in garages, teenagers shot for playing music too loudly at a gas station. As a nation, we are trying to make our peace with a cultural fortress mentality, with carrying our shells on our backs. But this, I would argue, is not the peace we should be in the business of making. *This is not the peace we should be in the business of making.*

★

The summer after Newtown—Newtown now not only a place but an event—Carol Ann and I worked with a program for student leaders from Bridgeport high schools. During one workshop, students were asked to design and present their visions of their ideal high school. The first group got up. And then the next. And then the next. Some had imaginative elements involving creative spaces, community gardens, experiential learning. Others mentioned services and supplies many of us take for granted: technologies, academic support, even more garbage cans so that the schools could be cleaner. And one after the other, they highlighted one area no school could do without: Security. Metal detectors. Guards. More “attractive” door locks (to replace the chains that wrap around the door handles in some of the main hallways).

When the time came for questions, I asked whether any of them had considered that an ideal high school might be one with no security measures. Students became animated, their responses ranging from incredulous to adamant. Some laughed aloud. Others protested vigorously, emphatically slapping their hands on the desk or their knees. One or two eyed me skeptically, raising an eyebrow in recognition of my privilege. A school without security, they seemed certain, would be no place for learning.



Retrieved from: galleryhip.com

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The text I received from my husband late in the day on April 25th—Cathedral Academy Poetry Celebration Day, Jonathan Law High School Prom Day—was achingly spare. Two words: “Bad day.”

The young woman, Maren Sanchez, was the daughter of a friend; my husband was a first responder, accompanying Maren in the ambulance. The ambulance was crowded, and my husband is large, but along he went, squeezing behind the paramedics, scaling the equipment, and finally hanging by a strap from the ceiling above the gurney as the EMTs worked frantically below.

About the young man who killed her: “He was her friend,” Maren’s mother said to me when we spoke. “They’ve known each other *for-ever*,” she said. A point reiterated by a minister at the memorial service, who said, “Chris and Maren were friends.” And then, “I’m sure she has already forgiven him.” *I’m sure she has already forgiven him.*

This, in a school with security, an assigned armed police officer. With routine lockdown drills that presume an AK-47, hundreds of rounds of ammo, an unauthorized intruder. What drill is there for two kids who have known each other since the fourth grade? Through movie nights and skate park parties and talent shows and beach cookouts? What drill is there for that?

★

The day Maren was murdered an email message arrived in my inbox from Melissa Quan, Fairfield’s Director of Service Learning, an acknowledgment of this latest episode of school violence and how it had touched me. In the subject line, Melissa wrote, “Joining you in your mission.” I wasn’t sure to which mission she was referring until she paraphrased a foundational question I often invoke, Mary Rose O’Reilly’s (1993) reference to her professor’s paradigm-shifting quote: “Is it possible to teach English so that people stop killing each other?” (p. 9).

Melissa’s email reflected back to me work that had indeed become my mission, in many ways without my realizing it, and helped me to realize that I needed to be more purposeful in both doing and making visible this work. The power of O’Reilly’s question lies in its simplicity, in its directness. The answer must be equally straightforward—for me, for

O'Reilley, for my colleagues who partner with me in peaceable work. The answer is yes. It has to be yes. Otherwise, we should all be doing something else.



Retrieved from: <http://www.keep-calm-o-matic.co.uk>

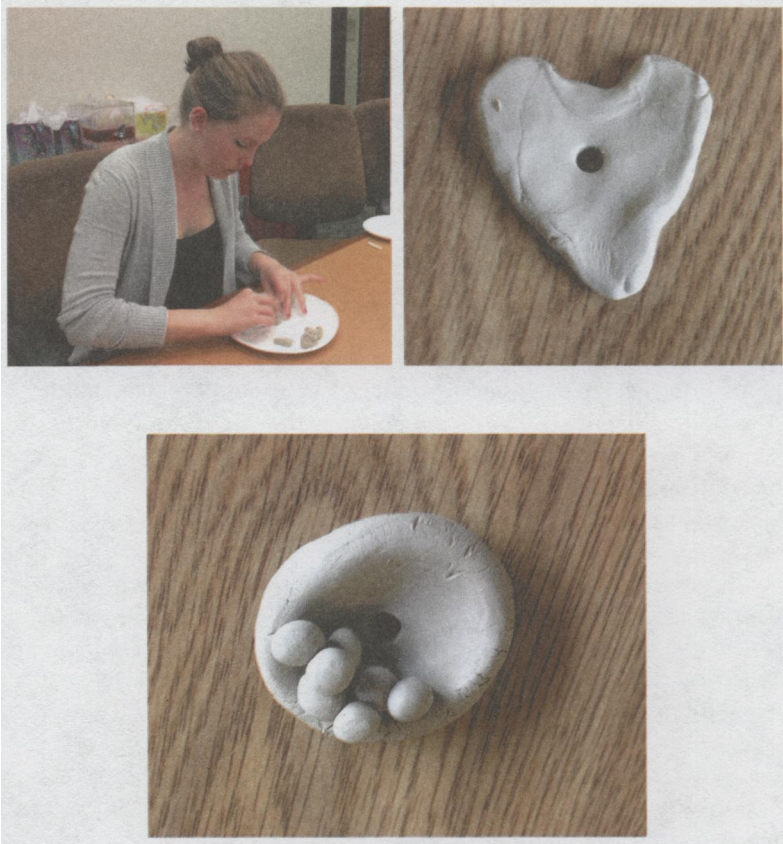
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Our end-of-year writing center staff gathering took place only a few hours after Maren's memorial service. I considered re-scheduling, I considered skipping, I considered going as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened that day at all. Then, a day or two before the meeting, an opening came in the form of a note from Carol Ann, inviting the writing center staff to do some therapeutic sculpting as part of our semester reflections, using a box Carol Ann had gotten from an organization called Ben's Bells, which has a location now in Newtown, Connecticut. Ben's Bells seeks "to *inspire, educate, and motivate* people to realize the impact of intentional kindness, and to empower individuals to act according to that awareness, thereby strengthening ourselves, our relationships and our communities."²

Too often, we think of kindness as a quality someone either possesses or not. We admire a kind person as a rare object. We speak of kindness as a random act, something that surprises us precisely because it is unusual, unexpected. Kindness, however, is really a habit, an orientation, something we practice and, indeed, can become better at. Kindness is something we practice in relation to community, and some kindnesses

² Retrieved from <https://bensbells.org>.

are not associated with any one individual but with a sense of collective purpose. By the time a Ben's Bell is completed, for example, at least ten people will have had, quite literally, their hands in it. Some will have fashioned the clay, others will have painted a bead, still more will have fired and strung them. None of these hands will have known the other hands involved in the final creation—no bell can be made in one sitting—and yet all will have trusted that the next makers will care for it, will seek out its beauty, and will bring it closer to brightening a corner of the world.



Photos credit: Elizabeth Boquet

At that final staff meeting, as lumps of cold, damp clay passed from hand to hand, we didn't force the connections between sculpting, tutoring, community, and peace. We talked some. But mostly we made tiny birds'

nests, hearts, peace signs, and pig faces with perfect snouts. "This was just what I needed," one tutor said.

That's enough.

★

In her book *Peripheral Visions for Writing Centers*, Jackie Grutsch McKinney (2013) invokes Jerome Bruner's work to remind us that a story does not "just happen": "Stories...shape our lives by how we interpret them, by how we tell them, by what they do" (p. 81). Grutsch McKinney goes on to tell her own story of taking an enrichment drawing course at a local community college while in graduate school and of learning in that class about the importance of drawing the negative space, a technique that counters the tendency to draw what we see in our heads at the expense of drawing what we see right in front of us. To do so, the artist must "not actually think about drawing the object but [must] instead focus on drawing the space around the object—drawing the negative space" (p. 88). This technique changes how we see and what we see; it calls attention to the dimensions beyond the immediate object and positions that object differently in its own space and in our field of vision. Similarly, Grutsch McKinney calls on those of us in writing centers to draw the negative space of our work, to enlarge our field of vision in a way that "recognize[s] the scope of what is already done in the writing center" (p. 80).

If we were to draw the negative space around our own centers, would we see intentional kindness as work that we are already doing? I think we would, in many ways. What if we named these efforts as such? I think of the impressive scholarship done by our colleagues who have enlarged our understanding of writing center practice immeasurably, who lead by example in advancing conversations about multilingualism and internationalization; about social justice, anti-racism, and LGBTQ frameworks; about community-engaged partnerships on and beyond our campuses. What if we gathered this work under one umbrella, as the essential work, the grand narrative of what writing centers are and do?

I want to make one final, brief, suggestive turn, to the idea of Creative Placemaking (as promised in my title) because I think it offers us a way to do exactly that. Creative Placemaking is defined as "public, private, not-for-profit, and community sectors partner[ing] to strategically shape

the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, tribe, city, or region around arts and cultural activities” (Schupbach, 2012).

In *The Great Neighborhood Book: A Do-it-Yourself Guide to Placemaking*, Jay Walljasper (2007) lists eleven principles of placemaking:

1. The community is the expert.
2. You are creating a place, not a design.
3. You can't do it alone.
4. They'll always say it can't be done.
5. You can see a lot just by observing.
6. Develop a vision.
7. Form supports function.
8. Make the connection.
9. Start with petunias.
10. Money is not the issue.
11. You are never finished.

You are never finished.

Walljasper's eleven principles would certainly have been familiar to Walt Disney, though the originary impulses are radically different. Creative Placemaking doesn't seek to make something out of nothing, to turn orange groves and tobacco farms into The Most Magical Place On Earth.



2013-2014 Poetry-in-Communities chapbooks

Creative Placemaking spaces are not manufactured, and they might not even be particularly well-manicured. Creative Placemaking instead asks us to dwell, deeply, in the material realities of our existing communities. As Nedra Reynolds (2004) writes, “[D]welling is a set of practices as well as a sense of place” (p. 140). (And I hear in Reynolds’ quote the refrain about kindness as a practice.) These same eleven principles are also certainly familiar to those of us who work in writing centers, and they should animate our efforts to be wholly of this world while striving, as Richard Miller (2005) has written, to “[bring] better worlds into being” (p. x). We are the creative initiators—the imagineers, if you’d like—of our own writing center placemaking.

★

After that Walt Disney Hilton parking lot brawl, we returned to our rooms and packed up to leave the next day. I don’t remember whether this was a dramatic get-your-things-we’re-leaving kind of departure or whether it was simply time to go. I do remember that, on the drive back home to Louisiana, I felt every one of those 700 miles. Shortly after returning to our real lives, my boyfriend and I broke up. I have no idea whether the two men ever mended their fences, or whether any of our group has ever made it back to The Happiest Place On Earth. Until now.

I wonder.

Acknowledgment

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Elizabeth Boquet is Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center at Fairfield University in Fairfield, Connecticut. She is a two-time recipient of the International Writing Centers Association Outstanding Scholarship Award and is a former co-editor of *The Writing Center Journal*. Her books *Noise from the Writing Center* and the co-authored *The Everyday Writing Center: A Community of Practice* were published by Utah State University Press.