FLOW ~ or Finding (and Keeping!) Joy in Academic Writing and Research ~

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that elusive sense of **F L O W** –

- space/time to connect here and now at the Obermann Center
- sustaining practices

- **demands of knowledge production**
  - words, ideas, contributions, interventions, publications, winning grants, knowledge. All. Right. Now.

- **research time as “catching up”**
  - (vs catching breath, deepening of work, connecting and sustaining)

- **cultivating pleasure in our work**
  - can enhance its rigor and meaningfulness to publics – (breadth and impact)
  - can enhance work flow ~ (in final version and in our process)

- **aim:** craft plans for approaching project(s) with a sense of curiosity, intellectual commitment and possibly (!) joy.
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Writing Through Writer’s Block:
*Race, Gender and Knowledge Cultures in the American Academy*
MS in process
introductions!

- your name!
- something you are curious about in a project right now OR
- something you are hating about a project right now
- (if possible in a single sentence! 😊)
I would like to acknowledge that we are present here on the homelands of the Ho-Chunk, Meskwaki and Otoe nations. We acknowledge their claims, along with those of the Ioway / Báxoǧe, Missouria and indigenous people from many nations, in this region.

if people would like, we can discuss land acknowledgement as part of our embeddedness in the colonial history of the American academy later ~
overview

writing as craft, art form, honed process

legacies of place felt as inspiration / burden
Part 1 – writing & flow

“If you find that writing is hard, that’s because it is hard.” (William Zinsser 2001)

“Because I had assumed that Anzaldúa’s words flowed effortlessly and perfectly from her pen and keyboard, I was startled to realize the extent of her revision process. Her approach to writing was dialogic, recursive, democratized, and saturated with the spirit-inflected, and only partially within her conscious control.” ~ AnaLouise Keating

**mystifications**
- flow as desired, elusive – something that “happens”
- flow as something (other?) people *have*

**paradox of productivity**
- counter-productive: writing as *too* slow, anxiety-provoking
- “dead-lines” – double-edged sword
**FLOW** : harmonious sense of balance between challenge and skill
(Mihály Csíkszentmihályi / positive psychology)

- intersectional understanding of flow / friction in academic research
- *What can be asked and studied, said and taught – how and by whom?*

- for especially underrepresented faculty:
  accounting for histories of speech, silence and silencing
  - content: materializing ideas, arguments, terminology, research design
  - form: presentation, dissemination – sense of authority, feeling believed, respecting our selves
  - institutional blocks: disregard, pushback, “casual” devaluation

**flow | friction | block –**

- access to authority, legitimacy, recognition in field / profession
- **TRUST**: creativity as freedom to reinvent as well as reproduce
  - walking as repeated act of falling and catching of self ~
  - creative, “inferential LEAP” – can be scary and exhilarating)
I write because life does not appease my appetites and hunger. I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To convince myself that I am worthy... Finally I write because I’m scared of writing but I’m more scared of not writing. (Gloria Anzaldúa 1981)
slow & fast
joy & frustration

slowness can be a privilege ~
• B + S note it is often the privilege of the tenured.
• But! the professionally secure can help set a pace.

slowness can be a curse ~
• sometimes we want to move swiftly

speed can be a curse too!
• rushing tends to be bad for knowledge and for us

slowness and quickness in writing are relationships to time, not purely a matter of words per day, publications per year.

à “timelessness” or periods of deep thought, creativity and problem-solving

à How can we work with as well as within time?
à How can we calibrate focus and cognitive-emotional states to be more at ease during the time we devote to our research?
Part 2 – invitations to pleasure

invitations to direct our thinking, invigorate energy into a project, troubleshoot, discover, explore, clarify ~

repertoire (not steps we would follow with every project!)

intellectual, sensorial, political
writing rituals: pleasurable writing environments

- **COMPANY:** solitude/ whom do we prefer to be around when we write?
- **PLACE:** where do we like to write?
- **TIME:** when do we like to write?
- **DURATION:** for how long do we prefer to write?
- **EMOTION:** what tasks best match our cognitive state that day/time?
- **SENSES:** what do we want to hear, taste, see when we write?
- **AUDIENCE:** whom are we writing for? Inviting out and inviting in
  - wishlist readers
  - scarier readers
  - trusted readers

**crafting a writing ritual** purposefully evoke the senses, modulate environments, focus through imagery and words (writing beacons or mantras).

**possible prompt:** what brought you to your current project, why is it important to you?
why do I want to write about this--?

1. Select a “tree” you know you want to write about.
   a. data set / result
   b. historical artifact
   c. biographical event
   d. art installation

2. Linger over it, describing it thickly for someone unfamiliar.
   a. What is it? What does it look like?
   b. What is its backstory? How was it made, why, by whom, and for what?
   c. How does it work?
   d. What are its impacts, meanings? How do we know?

3. Why do you want to include this tree in the project?
   a. What would you miss if it were left out?
   b. What do we learn through its conclusion?
   c. What questions does it raise? What can’t it tell us?

FROM FOREST TO TREE
1. Select an argument you want to make in the project.
   a. theoretical intervention
   b. methodological proposal
   c. rant

2. Linger over it, describing it thickly for someone unfamiliar.
   a. What is the claim you are making?
   b. How does it work, exactly?
   c. What is its backstory? What has motivated you to create this intervention / proposal/ rant?

3. How do you know that your argument matters?
   a. What is one example of how/why it matters?
   b. Who does it matter to or for?
   c. What evidence would you like to generate for our argument—where will we find it?
literature reviews:

feeling out the field, situating our interests and attachments

PART 1

PART 2

• annotate 4-5 books or articles
• I feel
  • gut responses as we read – tracking emotions
    • hate, love, appreciation irritation, boredom
• I say
  • main patterns to compile the project’s investments
  • comments and arguments in relation to
    • amend, extend, critique, shift the study
    • open, tighten, loosen, bend, reverse
• write a paragraph situating our project’s aims, methods, (potential) findings in relation to work in the field.
• we learn
  • knowledge gained for our field(s)
  • valuable why and for whom?
turning the editorial volume down

• turning it down: super super simple tasks

• turning it up: record critical voice’s thoughts and comments in margins
unlearning and unknowing

“what I’m writing myself out of is what I’m writing right now” (Fred Moten 2018)

1. Name one place where you are stuck. Try to be specific
   - places where our work feels thin
     (it could be with method, argument, framing, data wrangling—what point feels extra hard about the work right now?)
   - places where we fall into rehearsing tired phrasing

2. Briefly describe your challenge
   lay out the difficulty and feel free also to note any emotions attached to it (frustration, weariness, curiosity, shame, etc.). You are allowed to say “I hate X,” if you do!

3. Why is this particular point in your work challenging?
   try to answer this question without falling into self-accusation – consider your challenge a knowledge problem for the field, not for you alone and personally
   - places where we feel unsure
   - places where we have questions
   - places where we feel unsatisfied
   - places where our work feels thin
   - places where we hate, or are lost

→ Can you integrate an open, exploratory, intellectual discussion of the knowledge problem you are facing into your project...?

→ sitting with unknowing = the hardest and maybe coolest part of being an academic.
connecting
affect with
inquiry

- irritation or delighted skepticism
  -- what is wrong with ____ ? Like seriously - what is wrong with them/it?

- curiosity
  – what is interesting, weird, problematic about ____ ?

- engagement
  – what are we paying attention to today, and why is it important?

- generosity and gratitude
  -- who inspires us and why?
  -- what do we like and appreciate about that person’s work?
  -- How does their research support our own - and can we carry the spirit of their work into your own in ways that are true to your project?
  ➔ coupling critique with collaborative creativity
method: invitations to pleasure

invitations to (ebb and) flow

practices and cultivation of flow

1. disciplinary training – method, history, theory, praxis
2. knowledge of fields – secondary sources
3. knowledge of objects of inquiry – primary sources

4. our responses as we write are research data:
   • interest, concerns, boredom, surprise, delight
   • writing toward the interesting
   • wondering about the boring or the aggravating
   • “staying with the trouble” (Haraway 2016)
Part 3 – crafting plans, calibrating focus, decolonizing time
S M A R T goal that is appealing

30-60 minutes of writing ~

**completion-based goals:**
- “finish results section”
- “work on introduction”
- “sketch three sequences”

**inquiry-guided goals:**
- “how are my results different from others? How are they similar? What are their implications for x + y groups, my work?”
- “introduce archive ~ “why have I selected this material? What can it tell us about <topic>, and how do I know? What questions does it raise?”
- “what characters do I want to invite into this scene, and how do they look and feel? What action best captures this moment?”
big picture: plans that calibrate the experience of inquiry

to do list:
- completion
- product
- deadlines
- productivity

research program:
- interests
- commitments
- process
- questions
- contributions, discoveries, problem solving

summer plan:
- aims and goals
- process and product
- questions and discovery
- labor and support
what do you need to do this work?
big picture plans:

- working from/toward interests, commitments
- avoiding the paradox of productivity

1. What aspect of your project(s) seems most appealing or engaging?
   • offers entry points to begin a research program

2. What aspect of your project seems especially challenging to you at present, and why/how?
   • place to springboard, troubleshoot, experiment with and own

3. What are you most interested to discover and figure out as you work this term?
   • list to keep on desktop, in studio or on wall in office

4. What brought you to this project, why does it matter to you?
   • freewrite to revisit periodically, esp. on stuck days

5. What do you need to do this work?
   • springboard sessions, breaks, water, exercise, research support, music, tea, visit to archives, time w friends, time in nature!
go us...!

Wishing everyone a beautiful, enriching, sweet week of thinking, writing, work, play, and time with friends and (chosen) family...!
Discussion:)

- What do you all want to talk about??