



## A REFLECTION: WORKING WITH ALISON ROSA CLARK

TOM CARLSON

It has been a privilege to work, speak, and share with Ms. Alison Rosa Clark. Tutoring with her meant more than wrestling with sentences and paragraphs. It meant close scrutiny of our backgrounds, our assumptions, and our roles within academia. In translating her energy, exuberance, and tremendous insight into the written form, I must acknowledge the limitations of the form, the respect I must maintain, and my responsibility as, really, a mere messenger.

My time at Evergreen has taught me how gingerly and warily I must step, how vastly dimensional the consequences of my thinking and acting are. Working with Ms. Clark meant frequently confronting the, at times triggering, implications behind my words. This deepened my understanding of who and where, geographically and historically, I am. By looking squarely at my ignorance, I was able to grapple critically with the demands of higher education, the Euro-imperial paradigm that the written word is pursued within—that our very being is subject to restriction within.

What is the task of Western academia? How does it serve empire? How much of education can be understood, as she has put it, as a “tool of social control?” Who has a cultural “leg up,” is more comfortable within this framework of socialization, and who is asked to amputate particular pieces of their identity before they are allowed to even participate in what we call education?

What is writing for? When are we writing to perform or show or demonstrate, perhaps in order to ascend some social ladder? And how often can we write to share, to enhance a better understanding of ourselves and strengthen the bonds within our community? Furthermore, when we have the opportunity to share, how able are we to even utilize it? Are we taught *how to*? Working and struggling with Ms. Clark meant ruminating on these questions.

She described her writing process as an attempt to interpret herself, her heart, and her history. “I’m wary, because the words I write down matter to me.”

Do my words matter to me? Do I even know how to locate what matters to me? Or am I scribbling so that I can check a box?

Ms. Clark has said multiple times, “My writing is not centered in the head.” Where else can it be centered? What is writing that is centered in the heart and soul? How often is what we write recognized as an interpretation of our experiences, sensations, vulnerabilities, and what we hold most intimate and sacred? Working with Ms. Clark meant trying, *trying* to “show up from the inside out.”

That’s hard. I still struggle to understand what she means. The English language vainly provides some dusty catch-alls: authenticity, genuineness.

“People of color don’t have the luxury of not bringing their whole selves,” she said. What are the contents of the whole self? There is our history, background, our skin, our body, the assumptions we make, the assumptions others make of us, our taste. What else? There is the intangible, my core emotional responses: what makes me giggle, sob, feel ashamed, and feel horrified. Are we getting somewhere? These lists are hopelessly short, the attempts themselves fall into the old Western habit of atomization—and I thought we were talking about the whole self.

There can never be a sum total of the self, and the very idea is repulsive. People are too big for data sets; we have to respect the dignity of the soul. And there is no sum total that captures what Ms. Clark taught me and what she shared with me. I will say this: my ignorance runs deep and recognizing its dimensionality will never be complete, but I am beginning, *beginning* to understand how to bring my whole self. So far, it means widening my conscientiousness by allowing my ignorance to transcend the selfish confines of embarrassment—my naiveté is an opportunity to deepen my sensitivity. It means speaking and walking with integrity, and wearing my heart. I am grateful for knowing her and eager to keep learning.