



WOMEN'S WORK: THE FENCE AROUND THE FIRE

ANYA ALBERS

ON RELEASE...

My writing is a political act of healing. I rely on it as a tool for negotiating this world and my experiences as a target of oppression. I write to claim ownership of these experiences, to bring them into the reader's consciousness as truths, and to heal myself from them. For me, this process of creative truth-telling is ritually interrupted with the violence of systematic silencing that's inflicted when I release my words from the cages of their generative womb into a critical space.

Here my writing becomes too brash and too soft, too emotional and too violent. Too personal, too close, too distant or too removed. These are not observations based on a foundation of respect and trust for me as an author that would allow me to maintain ownership of my writing throughout the revision process, rather they are judgments that speak to the doublebind expectation of female writers to be emotionally hyperactive without crossing the illusive threshold where our writing loses academic credibility. We're questioned when we do not cry, and when we do, it's assumed we can't see straight through our tears.

Despite the pain of these myth-based realities in academic and peer writing circles, I still choose to release my writing. For my words can breathe only when they are being read. If I hoard them in the safety of privacy, they will never be heard. I will end up carrying their dead weight around inside me. If I choose to make my writing public, each reader can help carry around my truth when my words come to life inside them. Thus the load is lighter as it is distributed, and the truth is more real and complex as it exists outside of myself.

ON THE VIOLENCE THAT FOLLOWS...

The violence that I write myself out of does not end when I've written something down. Nor does it end when I find the courage to offer it to the public sphere. Now, I have to fight to maintain my authorship against the deep groves of powering over the truths of women writers. As writers coming from the underside of power structures, we must not only defend the content of our writing as truth, but figure out who is there to help us grow as writers and who is there in an effort to silence us.

There are cracks in all writing. And opening them creates the heat of potential. Some cracks let light through to illuminate the piece, while others allow the whole piece to cave in on itself. The problem with the structure of the classic academic revision process is that it splits open these fissures without a dialogue on ownership, authorship, and power that works to control the splitting process. Without this dialogue and/or agreement, we fall into the path of least resistance, where male-identified folks continue to define good writing and attempt to rescue and re-write women's writing to fit the dominant male standard. The cracks are filled with the reader's voice, agenda, and assertions of power and defense. The writer disappears. The crack becomes a rip that tears the writing and the writer in two. And the mending process is long and grueling. And it's almost always the victim who's left to put the pieces back together.

ON RECOVERING...

Like everywhere else in the world, the Writing Center is a place where a discrepancy lies between intention and impact, theory and practice. Tutors are taught a methodology that insists on the writer directing a session and maintaining her authorship. Yet, as I was being tutored on this very article, a tutor told me exactly what he would do if this were his piece. His use of language was one that assumed authorship over my work and set fire to the multi-generational wounds of silence within me.

Tutors at the Writing Center have access to information on anti-oppressive tutoring and are expected to uphold this effort. The existence of this pedagogy opens a space for dialogue, accountability, and collaborative un-learning and re-learning. The reality is that this process is painful and messy and imperfect. Hopefully, as students, humans, and writers, we are all trying to unlearn the engrained patterns of silencing ourselves and/or those we have power over. But even with this effort, we're going to make mistakes—mistakes that are understandable, but not excusable.

ON HOLDING GROUND AND TAKING CARE...

I choose my readers carefully, and I choose the writing I bring into a critical space deliberately. I have developed a kind of sensor to help me decipher when criticism is budding out of the fear and sexism of the reader and when it is sprouting from the fault lines of my work. Frequently, both occur simultaneously, and I'm left tangled in the two. It's confusing and exhausting and painful. But sometimes I can hear beyond my hurt. Sometimes I can look past the presumptuous language of a power-asserting reader to the part of my writing he is reacting to. And I'm able to look directly into the words that are causing his discomfort, fear and defense. And then I'm in a position to decide if there is a way to communicate my ideas without shutting the reader down. Or do I want to shut the reader down? This is a on a good day.

Then there are days where there is no room for negotiation and reframing. In these spaces, I protect myself before anything else. I block out comments or entire people, I walk out of workshops, I go home and cry and stop writing for a year and then start all over again from the ground up. I do this all out of preservation. Preservation of myself, my love for writing, and the truth I have that is important for others to hear.

In order to maintain writing as an act of healing, you as the author need to hold your author-ship and author-ity throughout the entire process. If it is being taken away from you, that is an abuse of power. Sometimes, you can transform the experience of being shut out of your writing—perhaps by making the reader aware of his impact, or by reframing/re-visioning his comments to something that lets you see his perspective as a reader and/or an agent.

Other times, even when you and your reader are doing your best, it's impossible to reframe or rescue the situation. At which point, I want you to value protecting yourself and your truth. This might mean leaving the situation and finding people who support you. This might mean using this experience as fuel to feed your next piece of writing.

Folks at the Writing Center may be doing their best to learn the extent of their own power, and where asserting that power begins to erase the person they are interacting with. But the unlearning is a process, and power-overs still happen. I've learned to walk through these spaces holding self-protection in one hand and reconciliation in the other. I hold the protection of my truth, and my writing. And I hold the reality that attacking someone for a learned societal behavior recycles violence. My agenda is to be heard, and I must improve my writing for this to occur. My agenda is to let "the other" know that re-writing my story is not okay, and that we can learn the ropes of accountability without the futile violence of blame.