

Un(en)titled

by Ann Bogle

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Reply to Open Letter from Claudia Rankine

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“My favorite is Black Cohosh—if you’ve ever seen Black Cohosh going in July. These strange, grassy plants turn north when they blossom, point like a field of bent white arrows. If you and I know each other in July, I’ll take you to see it.”

another girl to figure out (1)

no reason to break here/
want to tell her kinship to it
blue save them walked past
phone legs of dead Lady
black woman save them
victim standing just inside
betrayed her gray cherry
comfortable guilty long name
configuration of all mother
beautiful shades of protective
touches head lay nose whites
know French therapy bill
college man strong enough

another girl to figure out (2)

no reason to break here/
want to tell her kinship to it
blue save them walked past
phone legs of dead Lady
victim standing just inside

betrayed her gray cherry
comfortable guilty long name
configuration of all mother
beautiful shades of protective
touches head lay nosegays
know French therapy bill
college man strong enough

I presented the first version of this poem to a small, mostly handpicked writing group in New York in 2008. I wrote the poem in 2006 using a random method of composition. I let my eyes dart around in a text I was reading (the text now forgotten) until they landed on a word or two and transcribed them. It was not so different from a cut-up method but less mechanical and faster.

In our group of four women, three of us had studied writing together early in the 1990s at University of Houston and earned MFAs. My own MFA was the result of four years' study toward the PhD in English and creative writing. I had gotten into the only PhD program where I had applied and had tied for incoming fellowship in fiction. The other two women had started out to earn MAs and had "bought up" when the MFA became available. I suppose that meant that I had "bought down" or undersold in converting my PhD credits to an MFA. The fourth woman in our group had earned a PhD in English literature at Stanford and was working as a professor at City College in New York.

One of the women from the Houston set taught creative writing to undergraduates at Paterson as an adjunct (her decision). The other was working toward a PhD at the CUNY-Graduate Center. I had been out of the paid teaching force for the fourteen years since graduation, volunteering at literacy centers and online. I had a full (seemingly useless) résumé in teaching and editing and kinds of office work, including bookkeeping. I had been on welfare while living at my mother's house. I call it "welfare," and partly it was (Medicaid), but technically I had paid into the system (at low wages

in competitive arenas) and was on Social Security Disability (insurance).

It was strange then and seems strange to me now that I was not given access to paid work using my training. Fortunately, the other women were allowed at least partial access to the paid economy. The professor from Stanford had filed a sex discrimination law suit and won.

The group initially formed to be a site for discussing experimental writing. It attracted women writers and poets. No men joined. When I invited the writer at Paterson to join our group, I was a newcomer myself. I reasoned that her prose style was lovely, not unconventional, and her themes were edgy; her novel could be construed as experimental in the sense that it might not easily find a publisher or agent. She believed the novel performed racial consciousness in a white context, subtly there but not remarked on the surface. The founder of the group left before we considered content. She felt there were many writing groups in the city for conventional novel but none or almost none for experimental writing. The group began meeting at the novelist's apartment in Peter Cooper Village.

Our graduate student working toward her PhD lived in Harlem, where our professor taught, and I stayed with my boyfriend near NYU. My boyfriend was experiencing health problems and was frequently in the hospital—it was thought to be his own fault since he would not stop drinking for long—and I was viewed, charitably at first, uncharitably later, as a codependent caretaker of a privileged white man—"in it," the Paterson adjunct asserted to the group, "for the money." We had been friends since 1991. She said there was very big money in it for me as a caretaker, millions, as she put it, not the wage there was.

The adjunct was a graduate of Brown University, I of University of Wisconsin-Madison. At Brown, I was beginning to understand, particular emphasis had been placed during her undergraduate education on race relations and history in the U.S. Wisconsin, with no shoddy record in granting access to African-American students

early in its history as an institution, placed particular emphasis during my undergraduate education on feminism and women's rights. Our trouble decided when the CUNY PhD student, a poet, cried out, "Racination!" during discussion of my poem.

I thought "racination" meant that I had mistakenly racialized the poem, so I reworded it. In the first version the landscape concerns black and white people. The second version—later published in an internet magazine and poetry chapbook—seems Anglo-linguistic with a double entendre on the word "gays."

Many years ago I wrote a short story called "Mugabe Western," now published at *Big Bridge*, about a white female college-graduate office worker who meets an African national at a party. She is detained at his apartment the morning after she meets him and taken to the police station for questioning. It becomes embarrassing for her when she is forced to admit she barely knows him. He, meanwhile, is thought to be an illegal alien possibly involved with anti-apartheid activities, possibly suspected of terrorist organizing. That was 1985. In a postbaccalaureate semester with Lorrie Moore, she guided me through three drafts of the story, one I eventually wrote a dozen times. Editors at *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic* wrote kind notes about it, but it didn't see publication until 2009. After it was published—along with an excerpt of a lyrical prose narrative I wrote from 1988 to 1993—Jefferson Hansen interviewed me on tape for his weblog, *Experimental Fiction/Poetry/Jazz*. The interview disappeared from the internet some time in 2010. In it, Hansen asks whether the narrator exoticizes Mugabe when they meet. Elsewhere in the story it is clear that Maria is unattracted to her boss's nephew, a young white academic on cocaine, with whom she feels expected to remain involved and possibly to marry. The story, as I see it, close to as Maria sees it, is about finding love. She finds new love with Mugabe and is plunged into the machinations of U.S. isolationist and imperialist policies. Mugabe, meanwhile, stays underground. The story is fiction. I would write it again, that is: no regret, though I suspect my volunteer status has stemmed from these and other categories of position, personal and literary. In

1990, the year before I learned I would have a disability, my professor in Black Women Writers called an essay I had written “off the wall” and nearly failed it until I had proven I could write expository prose. I had followed an impulse to write a personal essay about race as it related to novels we had read together and that speculated about Jamaican roots in my family.

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St. Louis Park, Minnesota
1,325 words

Topic questions: If you write about race frequently, what issues, difficulties, advantages, and disadvantages do you negotiate?” and “If you don't consider yourself in any majority how does this contribute to how race enters your work?” also, “In short, write what you want.”

