

Harnessing the Magical Properties of Collaboration for Transforming the Neoliberal University

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FROM DOCUMENTARIAN POST REFLECTION, APRIL 6

I am sitting in my kitchen as dusk deepens the blue of sky. Between the still bare branches of the trees, a white moon, almost full, slowly rises. It was on Friday, March 27, that I realized the collaborative possibilities for positive social transformation to which being a Documentarian suddenly created access. *At first I was just following the instructions and answering the questions. I felt hesitant about writing anonymously as a Black scholar in a survey created by and primarily for white scholars, but then the survey became a structure and a community in my life at a moment in time when I had lost so much of my structure and community due to the switch to online teaching. The voice in the survey became my friend.* Joyce Elbrecht and Lydia Fakundiny explain how collaboration creates additional consciousness in their wonderful essay “Scenes from a Collaboration.” The essay is written in the voice of Jael B. Juba, the fictional author of their collaboratively written novels, as she reflects on her own existence. *The jail be the juba. The jail is the process of collaboration to which Elbrecht and Fakundiny chose to submit and through the shared commitment something additional and fictional, but not less true or real, comes into existence.* For the Documentarians, the jail was the surveys, twice a day (and now also this reflective survey, soft lavender background), and the jail, the survey, is the juba, the magic—what Chela Sandoval would call the within, yet beyond. *Sandoval extends Louis Althusser’s theories to argue that “the citizen-subject can learn to identify, develop, and control the means of ideology, that is, marshal the knowledge necessary to ‘break with ideology’ while at the same time also speaking in, and from within, ideology.” Sandoval then positions US third world feminists, including Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, Paula Gunn Allen, and Nellie Wong, as concrete examples of a consciousness that “permits*

functioning within, yet beyond, the demands of dominant ideology" (44): the immense energy required to break with ideology from within the swiftness of our hegemonic neoliberalism; the beautiful collaborative energy generated by Julie, Bump, and Bree that they open to a larger collective. Their juba becomes ours.

Writing as a Documentarian participated in the work of processing my situation/events over the week of writing in empowering me to the location of my resistance within the university where I am currently employed. I feel filled with joy, magic, hope, clarity of purpose, and strength. I welcome the gift of structure, the bold imposition in our daily lives at home rather than at a conference—but this as a choice we could make—unlike our jobs which was not a choice. I feel grateful to be part of a makeshift community with our attention turned to this moment. I feel grateful for the scholarly expertise to be present and articulate about the power of our collective and with a praxis to tap into and amplify and be amplified. When I realized that the survey was getting in the way of my work routine, I changed the terms of engagement, but there was nothing stopping me from doing so. I see that as a turning point in the journey, which enabled me to harness our Documentarian juba for sobriety and quitting smoking, *a baseline for radical action as the only Black full-time instructor in the first-year writing program in a public university in northern New Jersey; I have been worried about the toll on my health of resisting white supremacy in the university.*

Last week was a little rough spirit-wise, but not too bad. I was missing smoking and became mildly irritable. But I have good discipline and can break the addiction in a week without too much misery. Ten years ago, I took a photograph of the glass door of the Thomas Merton Center on Penn Avenue in Pittsburgh. It had a palm card taped to it with the words "Radical Sobriety." *I had never heard the phrase before, and while the date for the event had passed, the palm card sparked a meditation.* Then when I moved to Newark, sobriety was a valued practice in our activist communities. I was sober for two and a half years so that I could adjunct, develop a scholarly praxis for social justice, and finish the dissertation. There is a story of the night and day of the decision which includes moonshine at Skippers, one of Amiri Baraka's spots, and a Fanon conference at Columbia in the morning. Anyways, I need to move back into that level of productivity. I've been lost in grief for almost two years, but this "*pandemic is a portal*" (Roy). I am committed to build within, yet beyond the new directions higher

ed is using this pandemic to push through. I know sobriety is a skill I use to enjoy working hard. I know I have been relying on nicotine as a toxic surrogate for joy. I was able to use my expertise in writing collaboration to identify the likes of Jael B. Juba whom I courted to discipline my health and self-care as a baseline for building resistance, which is what I learned to do from US third world feminism and from new countrypeople-warriors who extend our praxis. My writing as a Documentarian exponentially increased the quality of my health and wellbeing which grounds me for resisting and reshaping the neoliberal waves gathering in our universities.

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“I myself, a creature of these wilds, experience a degree of dementia much of the time and have come to welcome the old and familiar, its temporary duration exposed like an outdated, weathered signpost twisted by the season and pointing earthward—old and familiar, and a reminder to stay on the lookout for the likes of me, hardly distinguishable in the vastness of these fictional wilds except to the scouting eye of the venturesome reader.”
—Jael B. Juba

FROM THE MORNING AND EVENING SURVEYS, MARCH
25 - MARCH 29

It's Wednesday so I start teaching at 10 a.m. and then teach again at 11:30 a.m. I feel far from the question because already this Wednesday was different from a regular Wednesday because I was going to be at Cs and had created online classes for my students. But, a new layer of difference has been revealed, and so which regular, because our regular was before the now-regular of social distancing, so in that regular I am at the conference, but there was a regular for this week before this new sense of regular. On a regular workday, I grade some papers; I teach two classes; two days a week I have office hours; I eat at least two meals a day; I probably will binge watch in the evening before going to sleep. I brush my teeth, maybe floss, send work emails (not in that order perhaps), “Yet to cite the everyday that holds up civilization is immediately to become aware of how it is tangled in, woven from, constituted along with the rhythmic recall of the epic” (Delany 255).

I was looking forward to today. Last year was my first Cs, and I became a member of the Black Caucus. This year I am one of the facilitators of the workshop “Real Talk: Using Personal Narratives and

Embodied Experience to Reimagine African American/Black Rhetorical Studies.” I was excited because my family celebrates difference and wanted to share our strategies for communicating and building love across our differences, particularly as it relates to continental, color, gender, and sexuality differences.

When I have a backlog of essays to comment on, like I do today, I just plow through them one by one, and take breaks as needed. I have to remember to intentionally schedule by the hour for my office hours at 10 a.m., which also reminded me that I also have to remember 8 a.m. (which I missed by thirteen minutes) to listen to *Democracy Now!*

The general weariness of too many papers to comment on.

The regular worry that my stamina is not up to the task.

My city is in lockdown. Our mayor used the crime-mapping technology to map COVID-19 hotspots. My neighborhood has additional restrictions. We are not allowed walks except for emergency or essential shopping. All of the city has a curfew from 8 p.m.–5 a.m. We have already been feeling the forces of gentrification. Which businesses that have closed will not reopen and what will be in their place? I worry about people suddenly unemployed and how many have jobs or statuses that might prevent them from receiving government assistance. I worry about the rise of domestic abuse.

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In the kitchen still, I smell the smoke from the grill and hear Melissa Ethridge’s live concert. My green glass Pellegrino bottle sits on the table beside me. The action is typing. The action is breathing. In the lot on the other side of my backyard is a grey garbage can with a plastic bag caught and fluttering in the wind like some sort of animal.

“Andrew Cuomo is no hero. He spent years slashing hospital capacity.”

My day looked like I had planned although I never did leave the kitchen as my workstation. I did do my daily trip to the cherry blossoms. I didn’t grade as many papers as I wanted.

Sit. Move. Sit. Move.

While sitting my fingers move as I type.

My eyes move as I read what I type.

My chest moves as I breath.

Sometimes I quietly speak the words.

I had a sobering realization. As a full-time contingent instructor of first-year writing, life hasn't changed much. If anything, not having to go to campus and teach classes makes life easier. The classroom is my joy, but it also takes a lot of energy and coupled with the work of reading and commenting on essays, I am often exhausted by evening. Without spending energy in the classroom, I feel rested, but my time hasn't changed. I just have more of it: to spend reading, commenting on, and grading student essays. It's not comforting to realize that the demands on full-time contingent faculty require us to live lives of social isolation.

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I'm still finishing up grading those thirty essays. I also have to take my trip to the cherry blossoms for my project and post yesterday's. I am a day behind now for two days in a row. If I do not go running today, I have to go running tomorrow.

"Thirteen Deaths in a Day: An 'Apocalyptic' Coronavirus Surge at an N.Y.C. Hospital"

These surveys are a stability for me right now. Something to look forward to. I also find them challenging because I haven't read the Q&A doc. It scares me that my thoughts through this form may become aggregated data that I have no control over: a difference between creative writing and comp-rhet narrative. I have decided we are allies, but we don't know each other well yet. I wish I didn't have so much to grade so that I could organize my days in ways that would allow me to perform more for this survey—the way I would've been able to do in Milwaukee. I am also thinking about a friend's post about how we should be organizing and not grading as much. I also feel this survey is a structure for me, the way my classes serve as a structure for my students. Because of this survey, I decided to floss this morning so I could report that I had flossed rather than carrying the need to floss with me all day and then never getting to it.

Do you have any questions for us? Anything we can help with at this moment?

Nothing this morning.

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Friday!

I did things a little differently today. I got through a bunch of essays before filling out this survey. The energy and concentration these

surveys invite had been leaving me with less for commenting on essays. I plan to go for a run, do my cherry blossom project, which I didn't take footage for yesterday, and grade more essays. I also hope to join a family Netflix watch party of *Self Made*. I wasn't originally going to do that, but I realized that it connects to the work I was planning to do in the Wednesday workshop and becomes a way to connect with family and continue the intellectual work of Cs.

I am feeling good. It is always helpful when a concrete task is already behind me, and it's still morning.

The kitchen, the kitchen, the kitchen. WFUV on the radio. Sun in the window. Glass water bottle by my side. Sparkles whisper as I unscrew the top and tingle as I take a swig.

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A Black history calendar from 2008 hangs on the slim strip of wall between the window and the door to the backyard, open to the frontispiece. Above the caption, "The Chicago Defender" in large cursive font, is a decorative gilded purple frame. Within the frame is a black and white picture of a young Black boy carrying a large bag that looks like a basketball, in the background a brick building and a tall copper lamp post. The boy holds a large newspaper in front of the bag. I stand up to read the title of the headline: I can't quite make it out. WFUV on the radio. Glass water bottle empty beside me so I better go get that. Sparkle. Don't get me going on the state of my water (forgive the pun).

"Total System Failure: Congress Pushes \$2 Trillion Pandemic Bill. Will Dems Allow 'Corporate Coup'?"

Today was magical. I finished grading a class in the morning and then emailed a class an extension in the evening after making good headway. A student texted me for feedback this evening because she works on the weekends. I wanted to ask her where she was working because so many are not right now; the ones who are, are labeled essential. What is essential? And who decides? But I simply texted her that I'd read it right away and then it was truly fantastic, so I was texting her how much I loved her first paragraph, etc., while also writing feedback on Canvas. At the same time, I was trying to get onto the cousins' Netflix party chat for *Self Made*. I took a run. First got cherry blossoms footage. During my run I bump into a bestie and her dog just finishing their run. And she was able to hook me up. Friday at the conference,

maybe I'd be with friends having a drink. This would be the fun survey. Three days in and late at night.

It's so complex right now. There are a lot of things happening and my role is education which is deemed essential in its ability and inability to move online. I have concerns about how my domestic space has been turned into my workspace. I have concerns how easy the shift.

I received an email from HR that said they paid me extra for March 20. I could either have the overpayment taken out from the next paycheck or the next two. The mistake was made because all tenure track faculty receive backpay from our new contracts, but the full-time contingent do not. For a moment, HR must've thought we had better contracts than we do.

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This was Saturday!

I was planning to go to a morning panel and then take the bus to Kenosha to visit my sister, niece, and nephew before flying home.

I did it differently again today. I accomplished everything I needed to accomplish before doing the survey. My hopes and achievements are one and the same: farmer's market, finally finish that grading, morning survey. I guess then it is the morning, if I am filling out the morning survey. What do I hope to accomplish today? I hope to spend time reading the email about the survey and the types of questions we are encouraged to ask ourselves as we respond to the surveys. I hope to do a performance for the evening survey.

Time was suspended as I finished my backlog of essays. Now, time is expansive as the day unfolds again in morning to evening, the time between surveys. How long will that be? This is exciting new territory that happens in the moment of collaboration when a collective is formed through temporal commitments: the act of collaboration creates another temporal dimension besides the standardized one. So here I am at the end of my day, and it's morning. To quote the art collaboration that created their own calendar: "What happens when you make time expand? Or lead it to take the shape of your dreams?" (Lara).

Awe, humility, joy

The scene around me is light blue with a grey border at the top and a colorful border patterning different shapes all the same size at the

bottom. I type into a white text box above a blue line. The font is sans serif normal black. The laptop is on my lap, and my cat is on my calves. I am on the day bed in the office/television room with magenta walls, the womb room, in the center of the house on the second floor. There is a lamp on the bedside table with an arts and crafts stained glass pattern. There are two empty highball glasses manufactured to look like crystal and two empty mugs. Short ones. One from my Gran's house in Scotland, a pattern of brown oblongs and loops.

In the day that has passed I had contact with some students over email. I went to the market. Chatted with the farmers some of whom have become dear friends. Last week was stressful. Those of us who knew each other kept social distance while the crowds had trouble. Today everyone was more relaxed, so it was easier to stand and chat, which I did. I also bought some donuts and brought them by my colleague's house. This wouldn't have been planned if I was writing this in the morning. This other day that's about to unfold, I don't know if I'll have contact with anyone.

I plan to find out if I've been doing this assignment wrong! I'm nervous for the final survey performance, but in a good way.

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I am in the living room. The curtains are drawn. A sliver of grey sky sneaks in in a slit. I am on my couch, a love seat. My journal is beside me, open and abandoned from last night's project never begun. My feet are on the brass and glass coffee table. "Elsie's Plate" is on the table beside me brought out specifically for tonight's performance. I kept its glass space helmet on so I could smell the moss and cedar as I write this evening about the day.

Today did not go as planned. I did read the Documentarian materials. The email on March 18, 2020, "New Opportunity for CCCC 2020 Documentarians," is a beautiful invitation to community in a worrying moment in time and set the tone for how I approached these surveys. Then I drank too much gin, woke up late. Because I used the temporal commitments of our collective survey to expand time, in one dimension it is 11:10 a.m. on a Sunday morning. In the dimension of our survey, it is still Saturday evening, thus the day is what unfolded between the morning survey and the evening survey. I listened to the vinyl soundtrack of the *Night of the Living Dead* performed by Morricone Youth. There was a moment of hope on side A that went well

with a passage from the email, but I didn't have the wherewithal, and still do not, to properly document the connection.

How did you use your time today?

Drunkenly.

Excited to decide that alcohol is not going to be a part of my self-isolation in these times of social distancing. The curfew makes it easy. All I have to do is get to 8 p.m., then the state does the work of self-discipline for me #silverlining #pandemicfascism.

This was totally the best. If you are the survey as well as the creators of the survey, in your open collaboration the juba formed is the form. Have you read Elbrecht and Fakundiny? 'Til we meet again and in what form.

FROM DOCUMENTARIAN POST REFLECTION, APRIL 6

Wednesday through Friday, my mornings and evenings were in the kitchen, where I am right now. The pattern was consistent—I would wake up, I would work at the kitchen table on my laptop, and then in the middle of the day, I would go for a drive to the cherry blossoms and maybe for a run in the park or a quick shopping. Saturday was different. I wrote in different spaces: in the morning which was actually the evening as the temporal possibilities of collaboration created an alternate dimension, I was upstairs in the office/den which I call the womb room. In the evening, which was actually on Sunday morning, racing the noon deadline, I was in my living room. The alternate temporal dimension started coming in to play on Friday morning when I did my grading first and then filled out the survey. This suggests that, when I am getting through a backlog of essays, I like to just wake up and plow through them until I run out of steam. The consistency of location suggests I like consistency. I like windows, and my workspace is pretty seamlessly integrated into my domestic space, a horror through which I'm not quite sure what to do with the ease of living. When I realized that the survey was getting in the way of work—the survey also being work but a kind for which I don't normally create space during the semester—I needed an alternate temporal dimension. As I built the alternate dimension, geography also became dynamic. I seem to have different needs for different types of work. It seems I need an alternate temporal dimension and different geographies to balance scholarly creative work with teaching commitments. It also suggests

my desire for collaboration as I used the occasion of collaboration to expand time as my research has taught me to do.

CODA, JUNE 8, 2020

I am sitting in my dining room that I recently turned into an office/classroom. I pushed the table right up against the wall and brought an old window, wood frame and all, down and propped it on the table against the wall. I can use it as a white board, but right now, I have printouts of the reflection survey taped to it—so I can see the whole in a single frame. I have a white peony with the most intoxicating scent in a glass bottle next to a newspaper sculpture of a rose a former student gave me as part of her end of semester reflection a few years ago. I am listening to “Shambhala Moon” on repeat, a favorite from twenty years ago when I hung with the Nudgie Music crew in the village bought this morning from an online marketplace. The contradictions of our lives are many. I have been sober for months, minus a few days here and there. I wasn’t able to quit cigarettes during the semester, but I’m doing pretty good since the semester ended.

This afternoon I took a break from writing and drove downtown to the Justice for George Floyd protest. For weeks now across the country and world people have been taking to the streets in protest to the brutal killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin who pinned Floyd to the ground with a knee to Floyd’s neck. A young sister caught the attack on a video that went viral and ignited the outrage brewing over the months of quarantine as the details of Ahmaud Arbery’s lynching became more clear and the outrage of the senseless killing of Breonna Taylor, an EMT worker, by Louisville police as she was sleeping in her bed, and the outrage of the particular vulnerability of our Black communities dying from COVID-19 due to the continued effects of racism that is the foundation of our country’s wealth.

People who know me will be surprised to hear today was the first of the protests I attended, and I left before we became a spontaneous critical mass and took over the streets in a march past City Hall on the way to Military Park. I’m normally out on the streets and sometimes even an organizer. But, I haven’t been feeling well, and I am trying to honor lessons from my experience at Cs this year where I connected to the juba of the collaboration amongst Julie Lindquist, Bump Halbritter, Bree Straayer, and the rest of us Documentarians and named my site of resistance and activism the university. A week ago we were hit hard—the first-year writing program where I teach. We have a core group of instructional specialists, many of

whom have worked here for over a decade, some even longer, who were integral in building the program, which was awarded a CCCC Writing Program Certificate of Excellence, and has been integral in founding our recently formed Department of Writing Studies. We had been told that all of our specialists up for contract renewal would be renewed. At the eleventh hour, a new decision was made, and five of us were informed in an emailed letter that they did not have their contracts renewed. The email was accompanied with neither regret, nor gratitude, nor acknowledgement of years of service. We are supposed to be the frontline of welcoming our students to the university. I do not even know if upper administration considers this an attack, and that an attack on one of us, is an attack on all, and an attack on the work we do, which is the work we do to lay foundations for student success. The waves of neoliberalism are sweeping through with a force.

We will resist. We will advocate for the reinstatement of our colleagues. We will advocate for teaching tenure lines for all FYW faculty. We will win.

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