

In Memoriam: K. Hyoejin Yoon

Memorial Statement for K. Hyoejin Yoon

Eileen E. Schell

Eileen E. Schell is Professor of Writing and Rhetoric and L. Douglas and Laura J. Meredith Professor of Teaching Excellence and Faculty Affiliate in Women's and Gender Studies. Schell is the author of six books and co-edited collections and many articles, which have examined the intersections of food rhetorics and agricultural literacies, feminist rhetorics, and academic labor, among other subjects.

All of us who had the honor of meeting Dr. Hyoejin Yoon of West Chester University will never forget how generous, smart, perceptive, insightful, beautiful, fierce, and kind she was. She was a leader and a role model for many of us in higher education and especially in Asian/Asian American studies and feminist studies. When Hyoejin passed away this past December of 2022 of a stroke, her death was unexpected. Her son Han, age 5, fiancé Tom, her parents, extended Korean American family, colleagues, and friends are all heart-broken at losing her when she was only in her early 50s. I would like to share with you briefly my memories of Hyoejin as her professor and mentor and as her friend of thirty years. My response may be more personal than professional, although I wish to intertwine both dimensions.



Image description: a close-up photo of Hyoejin Yoon hugging her toddler son, Han. She is smiling warmly, and Han has a joyful grin with closed eyes.

'I first met Hyoejin when she was a student working on her master's degree in English at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, VA. I was an Assistant Professor of English at Virginia Tech and only six years older than Hyoejin. She attended a guest lecture I gave on feminist criticism for a graduate seminar on research methods in English studies. I remember her sitting in the front row of the lecture hall, gazing up at me expectantly. I enjoyed being introduced to her afterward. Hyoejin told me she was interested in learning more about feminist theory and said she hoped we'd work together someday. She invited me to go to the local bar "The Cellar" in downtown Blacksburg where she and some other graduate students were meeting for a drink and playing music. I already had plans for the evening, but I remember being flattered by the invitation and curious about her life as a musician. I later learned she was an accomplished singer and violinist and played gigs regularly with John Priestley, another of our English graduate students.

During our two years together at Virginia Tech, I worked with her in graduate courses on composition pedagogy and critical theory, and I was honored to become her major professor and support her thesis work. Hyoejin was an excellent reader and writer of complex critical theories, including feminist theory and film theory, willing to stretch and work hard as a writer and thinker. I enjoyed seeing her tackle and critique theories of critical pedagogy and point to the ways these theories did not acknowledge the specificity of teachers' or students' bodies and affective relations in the classroom. Seeing her strong work ethic and theoretical acumen sparked me to ask her to collaborate on proposing two summer conference panels on feminism and writing pedagogy.

Hyoejin, and then fellow graduate student Jenny Bay (now at Purdue University), and I traveled together to conferences and presented while the three of us were at Virginia Tech. One of those times was to a conference at the University of Wyoming where we gave papers critiquing and questioning theories of critical pedagogy in relation to teachers' embodiment in the classroom. The conference included outdoor activities such as hiking, hanging out at a local campground for a barbeque, trainspotting, and visiting the infamous Cowboy Saloon in downtown Laramie, where visitors could rub elbows with local ranchers and cowboys. One night, we found ourselves at the Cowboy Saloon, playing pool against a group of rodeo cowboys clad in Wrangler jeans, massive belt buckles, plaid snap button shirts, and cowboy boots. Hyoejin was a pool shark and handily beat every single cowboy who approached the pool table. Part way through the evening, she leaned over and whispered, "*I'm the only Asian woman in this whole place, and I'm kicking their butts!*" They were no match against her skills.

Another time we attended and presented papers at a conference in Hamilton, New York at Colgate University. After driving for what felt like days through the tundra of upstate New York, we arrived in Hamilton only to learn that there were no restaurants open. Everything shut down after 8 p.m. except for the local mini mart and the laundromat, and our conference lodging was a newly built college dormitory with no dining access. We ended up the mini mart buying boxes of

“Lunchables” and then going back to our dorm room bunk beds to eat cheese, crackers, grapes, carrots, and skittles out of cellophane wrapped plastic trays. We giggled on our bunks and felt like we were back in college; we even glimpsed Andrea Lunsford striding down the hallway in her sleepwear later that night. The next night after a long day of conferencing, we went out to dinner with Joe Trimmer and Pat Belanoff to a two-hundred-year-old inn that was out in the countryside near farm fields. Joe told us stories about attending college at Colgate University, and Pat regaled us with stories of her work with Peter Elbow at SUNY-Stony Brook. At that point in the day, our energy was flagging after a long day of conferencing, but we saw how Pat was still going strong, still full of energy while we were slumping in our seats. I remember Hyoejin, Jenny, and I agreeing that we were going to do our best to match Pat Belanoff’s energy levels as we continued into our careers.

When Hyoejin finished up her master’s degree at Virginia Tech, I wrote a letter to support her application to doctoral programs. I remember confessing in that letter how much I was going to miss her at Virginia Tech. Hyoejin was admitted to the doctoral program at University at Albany—State University of New York and went north to work with Steve North, Lil Brannon, and other colleagues. The move to Albany was hard for her and a bit of a culture shock; she missed her supportive extended Korean-American family and friends in Northern Virginia and D.C. and the cold climate and fraying urban infrastructure of Albany was an adjustment. I remember visiting her in Albany, staying in her graduate school apartment a few times, listening to her try to make peace with her gray, cloud covered new hometown and the cold and snow of upstate New York. I had moved to upstate New York, too, to accept a position at Syracuse University so I could relate. I remember her sending me a determined letter after one of those visits in which she proclaimed: *“This summer, I’m going to find a way to love Albany,”* and she did over time. She made lifelong friends at Albany, taught, moved her scholarship forward and became involved in working at a non-profit organization where she supported LGBTQ rights and the rights of people of color. Hyoejin’s activist voice was amplified by this work and carried over into anti-racist teaching and her advocacy for BIPOC faculty throughout her career.

It’s rare that we, as faculty, follow our M.A. students to their next institution, but I was fortunate to be able to serve on Hyoejin’s dissertation committee at Albany, serving alongside Bret Benjamin and Steve North (her director). She wrote an insightful 334-page dissertation “The Subjects of Critical Pedagogy and Composition: The Asian-American Teacher Intellectual and Affect” on the problem of critical pedagogy and her own positionality as an Asian-American woman teaching in the writing classroom. Bringing together theories of racial identity, multiple consciousness, and the idea of the “teacher-in-process,” she argued for a “self-reflective process of teacher development that for Asian-American (and other) teachers could counteract critical pedagogy’s reliance on a finished and inscrutable teacher, who is also, often, white and male. This perspective could illuminate how to successfully enact alternative, liberatory pedagogies” (ix). One of the chapters in Hyoejin’s dissertation was revised to become the article “Affecting the Transformative

Intellectual: Questioning ‘Noble’ Sentiments in Critical Pedagogy and Composition” published in *JAC*, and it became the winner of the 2005 Elizabeth A. Flynn award for the best feminist essay in rhetoric and composition.

I remember tearing up when I read the dissertation’s acknowledgements page: “To Eileen E. Schell, my long-time mentor and friend, and a role model of a scholar, feminist, and activist, working for (i.e., doing) the things that matter most; she has been an unflagging supporter and a constant source of inspiration and intellectual stimulation” (vi-vii). I felt the same about Hyoejin—she inspired me, too, and our mentor/mentee relationship was more horizontal than vertical, what Pamela Van Haitsma and Steph Ceraso refer to as the “offering of help, guidance, and training) that is carried out within a horizontal rather than hierarchical relationship (between peers, as opposed to a more and less experienced mentor and mentee). (Van Haitsma and Ceraso 211).

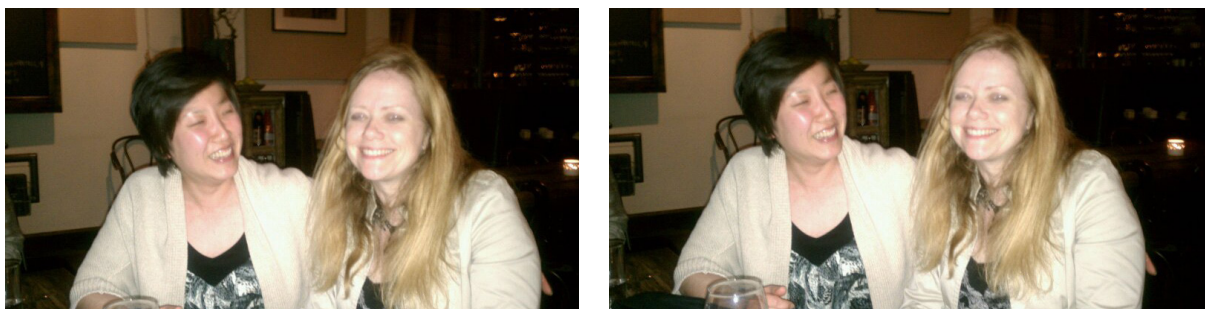


Figure 2: two photos, side by side, of Hyoejin Yoon and Eileen Schell.

They are sitting at a table in a dimly lit restaurant and are both wearing black and white print blouses with champagne-colored jackets: “twinning,” as Eileen Schell put it. In the photo on the left, Hyoejin and Eileen are smiling and looking into the camera. In the photo on the right, they have started to laugh. These photos are from the Conference on College Composition and Communication: the Atlanta convention in 2011.

As other colleagues have pointed out in their tributes, Hyoejin’s scholarship and administrative work were dedicated to making universities better places for women and people of color. She won awards and gained recognition for her work. She served on and ably co-lead national committees: The CCCC Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession, which became the Feminist Caucus Standing Group, the Asian/Asian American Caucus of CCCC and others. She also co-edited the important book *Building a Community, Having a Home: A History of the Conference on College Composition and Communication Asian/Asian American Caucus* (Working and Writing for Change, University of South Carolina Press) with Jennifer Sano-Franchini and Terese Guinsatao Monberg, which Terese and Jennifer comment on in their tribute.

Hyoejin and I often talked about the challenges of balancing career with family, especially the challenges of motherhood. One summer we met up near the Philadelphia airport for breakfast at a diner near Hyoejin's home, and we talked about her excitement about becoming an Associate Dean, about how I was balancing motherhood with being an academic Department Chair, and her struggles to have a child and the ups and downs of marriage. Having a family was a high priority for Hyoejin, but it was not an easy process for her. I was so excited to hear about the birth of her son Han Alexander, born May 28, 2017, when Hyoejin was 46 years old. She was up front about her fertility struggles and challenging birth process, agreeing to be interviewed after Han's birth by "Parent Trip" columnist Anndee Hochman from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. As she said of motherhood in the interview with Hochman. "It is nice to have something really important and big other than work in my life. It does feel like there's a little more balance" (n.p.).



Figure 3: a close-up selfie of Hyoejin, holding her son Han, and Eileen, who are standing together outdoors in a city at night. They are all smiling.

I finally got a chance to meet Hyoejin and Han in Philadelphia in October of 2019 when I attended the Community Writing Conference. Han, Hyoejin, and I went out to dinner and caught up. Han, now a toddler, enjoyed observing the fish tanks in the restaurant and running between our table and the tanks. I gave him a stuffed tiger as a present, which he clutched all night, and we snapped a photo of us outside the hotel where I was staying while we hugged goodbye. I had no idea that it would be the last time I saw Hyoejin. The COVID-19 pandemic shut down the conferences in which we usually staged our annual reunions. The last time I spoke with Hyoejin was in May of 2021. She called me for advice about a particular challenge she was facing in her job. We

made plans to meet up for dinner and attend each other's panels at the next in-person CCCC.

When I heard the news of Hyoejin's passing in December 2022 from a colleague at West Chester, I could not imagine a world without her. Via zoom, I attended her moving memorial service broadcast on February 4, 2023. I pored over pictures of us and past emails I had saved where she sent me her work-in-progress. I penned a letter for a notebook of remembrances that Hyoejin's family gathered for Han to read as he grows up. These past weeks and months since Hyoejin's death have often felt empty and sad due to losing her so unexpectedly. At CCCC in Chicago this year, I went from panel to panel thinking of Hyoejin. CCCC was our annual reunion time, and it was hard to wrap my head around the fact that she was gone. I had hoped we might tote Han around Chicago to see the local sights as we used to do with my daughter Autumn when she was a child attending CCCC. Walking the halls of the convention, I remembered so many milestones: Hyoejin presenting her first CCCC paper, accepting the 1996 CCCC Scholars for the Dream Award, receiving the 2005 Elizabeth A. Flynn award for best feminist essay in rhetoric and composition, attending the all-day Wednesday Feminist workshops together, attending the CCCC Committee on the Status of Women in the Profession and Women's Network meetings, knowing that the next night she would be attending to the Asian/Asian American Caucus. I don't know if I will ever get used to Hyoejin being gone, but I do know she would tell us to keep going and to keep doing the work that needs to be done.

In Hyoejin's honor, West Chester University, where she spent 20 years of her career, founded a scholarship to support women of color, a wonderful way to remember and honor her commitment to mentoring and supporting faculty and students of color and fighting for racial justice in higher education. One way we can honor Hyoejin is to donate to that fund, and another way is to continue to stay in touch with and nurture those who have mentored us and those we have mentored or are now mentoring. Hyoejin was an amazing, mentor, scholar, teacher, activist, Mom, family member, friend, and partner. We are all better for knowing her.

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