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An Interview with Sharon Bryan

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an interview with sharon bryan

Jeremy Reed

Sharon Bryan was the first author to begin the Wordfest series of writers this fall semester at Valparaiso. She has taught around the country in multiple programs and has published four books of poetry: *Salt Air*, *Objects of Affection*, *Flying Blind*, and *Sharp Stars*, the last of which won the Isabella Gardner Poetry Award. She has been awarded two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, and has degrees in philosophy, anthropology, and poetry writing. A group of three, Kristine Clay, Ian Roseen, and Jeremy Reed, interviewed her the day after she gave a reading in Mueller Commons.

SB: I was here once before a long time ago. I liked the students a lot, and there is something... I was trying to describe it last night to John and Gloria [Ruff]... there's a kind of seriousness about the students here, or what they're interested in, the kinds of questions they think about – it's stuff that I really like.

JR: Well, that's related to another of my questions. I've just been interested in the relationship between teaching and writing, because a lot of the people in our class have been talking about "where to go from here.

SB: Yeah, I was just going to ask you.

JR: Yeah, and so, I don't know, I was just interested in what you thought about that relationship. How has teaching shaped you as a writer, or vice versa?

SB: For me, they're totally bound up, and I didn't expect that. I didn't plan to teach. I was working for a publisher – a textbook publisher in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was a good enough job. I did copy-editing and actually worked for a really small publisher so we got to do everything, or assign a freelancer. We oversaw the whole process. It was interesting enough, but, you know, it was only nine to five. The best part about that is the five; you go home and you're done.

Then, a couple of years later, I went to graduate school at Iowa and at that point all of the graduate students who were teaching assistants taught literature, not composition. I probably wouldn't be here, I wouldn't be teaching now maybe if we'd had to teach composition [laughter]. But we taught literature. I had literally never thought about teaching as what I was going to do, and it wasn't sort of the standard thing for people to do. Fifteen minutes into the first class that I was teaching – I just felt like I was on fire. It was just, you know, some sophomore, junior, probably narrative fiction class, and it was just so thrilling. Really, from that minute I knew I would teach.

I think teaching, for me at least, I think it's different for everybody, but for me the teaching and the writing are really part of the same loop. It's the same conversation. It's just a question of who am I having it with. Am I having it with students? Am I having it with writer friends? Am I thinking about it myself in my study? It's really exciting to me. Teaching is the only thing that feels as interesting as writing. It's as demanding and it's varied. All my classes are discussion classes and you have to be right there, the way you do when you're writing. You know, you can't just be sort of spaced out. Or even, when I was working as an editor, a part of my brain really had to concentrate, but not my whole brain. You know? Part of it. Or the times I was proofreading. Part of your brain is really doing this laser kind of work, and the other part of your brain is just off on vacation or just thinking about something else. I like the stuff where you really feel like everything's coming together.

Do you expect to teach? Or do you not know yet?

KC: I've actually been thinking about it recently. I always thought I never would, but I don't know lately.

SB: It depends. You know, if you're a writer, I've always felt that you know from the beginning that you're going to have two jobs, two full-time jobs. I really push my students to think about everything they love.

I think any job would work with being a writer. It just depends on your personality. One downside of teaching, especially if you're doing it full time, there is no five o'clock. I mean, I got a lot of writing done when I had a nine to five job, because it wasn't a job where I took it home with me at all. Especially when you start out teaching and in university life, you don't have a five o'clock. [S chuckles.] You have a

five a.m.

JR: Another thing that we've all been talking about, or at least my friends, is that we all have pretty varied interests. We've spent our time, here especially, trying out all of these different things and finding the things that we like. When I was reading about you, I found out that you have three different degrees [SB begins to chuckle] in three extremely different things. Can you talk about that and how they've influenced you, or how they've influenced each other, if you think they do?

SB: Oh, absolutely they do. I said to somebody last night that there was a point after I started to write and had finished graduate work in anthropology and had started to write poems that I thought, "Okay, now I've written my anthropology poem." [laughter] It's in the first book of poems and I thought, "Okay, now I wrote about that."

It colors every poem I write. All my best writing students have other interests and disciplines. They come in from the sciences or something. You know there weren't creative writing majors, and I'm not sure how helpful that is. I mean, it's just a different place to start. When I was in school, I felt like I was the only person who did what I did. I felt like a freak. And the first time I sat in on a creative writing workshop at Cornell, I almost cried the first day when I realized, "I'm in a room full of people like me!" It was just so incredible. That's the good side of all these creative writing classes and majors. It's something you do have much faster than I had. I didn't see a living writer until I was in my twenties at Cornell and people came to visit. Then what I wanted to do became a real thing to me. Before that it was like... poems by dead people in books... and my wretched stuff.

You know, I'd never seen a draft of a poem by Robert Frost so I really did think they just started that way. It was so thrilling to me when I first saw... there's this Robert Frost poem called "Design" and it's really dark and it's a perfect poem. And then I saw the drafts for it, and it didn't start out as... you know, there are some really bad lines in there. I didn't have a clue that it could work like that.

One of the best students I ever had was actually an anthropology student at Memphis. I don't even think it matters what it is, but then you've got that sense of discipline from another field. You've got all that imagery and terminology and a way of looking at the world. I just think it's very important.

I think the crookeder the path the better in some ways. There's a poet named Albert Goldbarth. He lives in Wichita, Kansas for reasons I don't – they must pay him a lot of money [laughter]. He just keeps saying over and over to his students, "Creative writing is not a career path. Creative writing is not a career path. It's a calling." And I think certainly those of us in my generation feel like that. All of my teachers said, "Don't write if you can do anything else." It's not something you want to do... adequately. A couple of times when I've been teaching different places I've handed out a little questionnaire and one of the things on it, it's multiple choice, and one of the things on it is:

I want to be a good poet.

I want to be a great poet.

I want to teach but I want to know more about poetry.

And I'm disappointed if they don't put down that they want to be a great poet. Why would you want to be a good poet? Why would you want to be a good ballerina? You know? [laughter] You might end up there, but you're not even going to be a good poet if you don't aim for higher. Did I? I talk so much, I can't remember...

[laughter]

JR: So, with all of that, when did you begin writing poetry?

SB: When I got to Cornell, I was actually accepted there into the philosophy department, because I'd gotten really interested in Ordinary Language Theory when I was in philosophy as an undergraduate because I had a professor who specialized in that. And I'm obsessed with language. I had also my senior year totally fallen in love with anthropology at [University of] Utah. You know, at Utah, archaeology was very big and still is. There was an anthropology lab and I got hired when I was a senior to work in the lab and my job was that I numbered stuff that they brought back from digs. I was the one who wrote on the pieces of pots and the pieces of bones and stuff. It was one of the happiest times in my life. It was such a wonderful group of people and there was no hierarchy. It was faculty, grad students, undergrads. We'd go out every Friday night for pizza and beer. It was just, it was fantastic.

It was like we had our clubhouse. The buildings were really old from World War II. I had a temporary office in fact in one of the, there was a fragile stuff stored in an old meat locker, and it had to be kept in all these special circumstances and the chemicals were poisonous. So I'd go in the morning and it had this big handle that was high up

and I'd jump up and swing on the handle to open my office door. Go in there, run in there to turn on the heater, and then go back out and have coffee with somebody while the poison aired out and the heater warmed up and then I'd go in and I was classifying the stuff that was stored in there. It was just so much fun I could hardly stand it.

I would have switched to anthropology but I would have had to stay for another year and I just wasn't ready to do that. So I walk into Cornell and sort of the day I walked into the philosophy department I thought, "Ugh, what am I doing?" I took two philosophy classes and then an ethnolinguistics class. They don't like that in graduate school. They're training professionals and they don't like that. And I almost flunked the philosophy classes. And then I switched to anthropology. And, boy, it was mind-blowing. And, actually, at Ithaca College, there was a woman who taught primate anthropology, and had an accidental and miscellaneous collection of monkeys, live monkeys. And so I studied their communication some and hung out with them a lot and that was amazing. But the whole time I was there, I couldn't see myself – I did two years of classes and then I was going to leave and start writing poems – because I knew I couldn't see myself as a professional anthropologist. I just wanted to study all that stuff. I could imagine watching chimps all day. I would be really happy. But then I would want to go back to my tent and write poems.

One reason I didn't want to stay was that at the end of your third year you had to take your PhD exams. Oh no! But the best thing I ever did was stay in that third year, one of the best things, because I just studied the whole year. That was essentially the work, and it just brought

everything together in a way that I never would have otherwise. I passed the exams, much to my amazement. So I didn't leave with unfinished business, or a bad feeling. And they couldn't believe it. They were sure that at that point I would decide to stay, but I was like, "Oh, great, bye!" And then I started sitting in on classes at workshops at Cornell. And that's where I cried in the first class, but nobody saw it.

Then as it turned out, I never left anthropology or the philosophy behind. All that stuff comes with you. It's stuff you care about.

IR: I could ask my last one.

SB: Go ahead! Ask me anything you want. I'll tell you if I don't want to answer it.

IR: Would you say that writing is a career that you, personally, can ever retire from?

SB: Absolutely not, and I don't think it should ever be called a career. I mean, I certainly don't think of it as a career.

IR: Do you think that it could be something that you could see any true writer ever giving up permanently?

SB: No! I mean, I certainly gave up writing poetry for a while, or stopped writing poetry. Well, I think of it as I had a tantrum. I got distracted by the wrong stuff. I got distracted by the public parts of it and not being what I

thought was successful enough. But that's our culture. Doesn't value poetry much at all. I mean, I have Polish poet friends who have 12,000 people show up at a reading. But actually that's changing there too, since the fall of Communism. It's really interesting. I mean, poetry plays a whole different role when it's something secret and hidden and subversive. It's the only way, you know in Russia, after the revolution, Mandelstam and Annenkov would meet in his apartment. They would sneak out after dark. They weren't supposed to be out. They would read each other's poems. They would read them. Memorize each other's poems and then burn them because if they were caught with them, and he eventually was caught with one of his about Stalin, they were killed. That's high stakes. So here are American poets. What are we going to write about? Our Jacuzzi's? So how do you make poetry matter if it's not a matter of life and death. But I think most poets do think it's a matter of life and death, even if it's their own life. I mean, I certainly do. My life wouldn't have any meaning. I might as well be dead if I didn't write. I don't think of it as a career and I don't think of it as anything... it's your life. It's totally how you live your life. You're a writer.

What about you? What would you like to do with your life?

JR: I think I would really like to teach, but the question for me is what.

[laughter]

SB: What are the possibilities?

JR: Well, I guess, it's more a question of, I would really like to have some time to write, and so in that sense...

SB: You won't have time to write. You have to make time.

JR: Right, so I've been thinking about maybe teaching literature. It's one of my big passions. And then I've been teaching for the first time this fall with college students and it just catches in a different way.

SB: Yeah, that's wonderful. I mean, your whole face lights up when you talk about it.

JR: The only thing for me is that, I mean, I know there are some things I know I want to write about in an academic way, but the kind of writing that just kind of opens out right before me is creative writing, and so it's trying to figure out how to do that.

SB: Yeah. Well, you know, John Ruff writes poems, terrific poems, really terrific, and also is, as far as I can tell, a great teacher. You just have to figure out the balance. I have friends, a couple friends, who when they were young were into jazz. One plays sax. One plays trumpet. Both decided at some point, "Well, you know, I obviously can't keep doing this, because I want a family." One became a college literature professor and the other one's a lawyer. The one in Seattle who's a lawyer has a jazz quartet. It came back into his life maybe in his forties and then he started working with teachers. And the other one's in a small jazz group in a small town who plays every weekend. It's the proportions.

[John Ruff walks in]

SB: God, these are the most interesting guys.

Ruff: These guys?

SB: Yeah, these guys.

Ruff: They're convicts. They're out on work release.

[laughter]

SB: They faked it really well. They did ask really good questions.

Ruff: You guys finished? Good to go?

JR and IR: Yeah.

SB: What do you think about place? Do you think about place when you write poems?

Ruff: Um, yeah, I mean there are places for me. Richard Tillinghast writes a lot of "I'm on the road as a tourist. I'm going to settle into a place."

SB: That's right.

Ruff: Whereas I think I have to kind of settle into a place before I can. I mean, the muse has to sort of catch up to me, find my new address.

[laughter]

Ruff: You know, I'm starting to write Chinese. Well, they're not Chinese poems. They're poems that try to ape some of

the gestures in Chinese poems. Works of reverence.

SB: Do you work on them in China or here?

Ruff: I work on them there, but also some here. Northern Minnesota is a place where I know that landscape. I only have a few poems that are really Valparaiso poems. I mean, Joyce wrote his whole lifetime about Ireland. They said if they destroyed Dublin they could rebuild it from his works.

SB: I just think it's easier for me to write about places when you're not in them. And my great example, have you heard of a book called *Out of Africa* by Isak Dinesen? I've taught that book a lot. It's one of my favorite books in English. It's just gorgeous. I always think about it because she's Danish and she grows up in this little country feeling really cramped. Then she gets to Africa and it fits her. She can live this dramatic, large life without feeling like a freak. While she's in Africa, she writes but she writes fiction. Then she loses everything. Loses the man she loves, the farm she loves, the people she loves. She goes back to Denmark to her childhood room in the house she grew up in, the place she was so happy to get out of, and she looks out the window and she starts to write *Out of Africa*. And the first line is, "I had a farm in Africa at the foot of the Ngong Hills." Isn't that just – when I read that first sentence – it's what she can see. It's so much more vivid when she has to imagine it.