

Article

Epistolary as Art Form: A Methodology for Truth Telling

Hugo Kamya ^{1,*}  and Becky Thompson ²¹ School for Social Work, Smith College, Northampton, MA 01063, USA² College of Social Sciences, Policy and Practice, Simmons University, Boston, MA 02115, USA

* Correspondence: hkamya@smith.edu

Abstract

The article explores letter writing as both an artistic practice and a relational method of inquiry. Through an exchange of letters between two academics, the authors reflect on how their correspondence deepened their relationship and created space for honest, vulnerable communication. Their exchange began while collaborating on a program addressing racism, where they discovered that sharing personal stories could serve as a foundation for building authentic relationships across difference. By speaking openly about fears and truths typically hidden in academic spaces, their writing resisted the isolation of the academy and transformed silence into collective expression and action. The article includes the letters and poetry that emerged from this exchange, presenting storytelling as a liberatory and decolonizing practice grounded in feminist and decolonial traditions. The authors show how writing can simultaneously function as theory, resistance, and renewal. They ask where creative scholarly passions originate, how social location shapes the pursuit of justice, and what nurtures emerging ideas. Through critical reflection on their vulnerabilities and the process of building trust, they position letter writing as both creative expression and method. Meaning is generated through the act of writing itself, which becomes an invitation to activism and courageous storytelling. Ultimately, they argue that letter writing is an art form and a way of knowing that sustains continuous learning, deepens connection, and inspires action.

Keywords: epistolary as art form; storytelling as liberation; relationality in the academy; critical reflection; vulnerability and trust; authentic relationship-building; intimacy and dialogue

“A human mind is small when thinking/of small things.

It is large when embracing the maker/of walking, thinking, and flying.”

—Joy Harjo

Prelude:

We, Hugo and Becky—a social work scholar of African descent and a poet and social justice professor from a white Mormon background—began telling stories to each other a few years ago, after tragedy in Hugo’s family brought us to talk deeply outside of academic settings. We had been charged with convening a group of students, faculty and administrators to design an original program to address racism. In the process, we realized that sharing stories with each other might be a starting point for building authentic relationships across differences. We came willing to tell truths about “our grandmother’s hands” (Menakem 2017) and willing to share secrets and fears we had been taught to keep to ourselves in academic spaces. We began writing to refuse the malignancy of loneliness and isolation so common in the academy, to move together, as Audre Lorde has modeled from “silence into language and action” (Lorde 1982, pp. 40–44).



Academic Editor: William Walters

Received: 4 December 2025

Revised: 4 February 2026

Accepted: 10 February 2026

Published: 19 February 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and

conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

In this essay, we share letters we exchanged that led to writing poetry we recorded along with a group of people from one university community for a program to undo racism (convened by Professor Johnnie Hamilton-Mason). We offer our letters and poetry to give an embodied example of decolonizing methodologies that shift power away from withholding and lies to honesty and contemplation, that ask us to consider storytelling as a liberatory practice toward community building. In our writing, we ponder pertinent questions: How do we incubate new ideas for our work? From where do our boldest and most creative scholarly passions arise? What nurtures us in finding and giving voice to our emerging ideas? How do our social locations ground our work in the search for social justice? How do hunger and thirst meet our heart's desires?

To reckon with these questions, we expose our vulnerabilities through our writing to build trust and intimacy, treating this as an invitation to activism and an invitation to dare to tell a story in all its forms. In this article, we argue for letter writing to be considered as an art form and method.

1. Letter Writing as an Art Form and Method

Our correspondence unfolded over time and was shaped by our social locations, lived experiences, and relational commitments. We wrote from embodied ways of knowing that reflected memory, emotion, and sensory awareness (Menakem 2017; van der Kolk 2014). In this way, our letters functioned as sites of both personal and collective meaning-making. The epistolary exchange created a space for vulnerability, reflexivity, and truth-telling that is often constrained in traditional academic contexts (Lorde 1984; Hooks 1991). By engaging in this process, we resisted dominant academic norms that privilege objectivity and detachment, instead affirming storytelling as a liberatory and decolonizing practice (Smith 2012; Anzaldúa [1987] 2012).

Consistent with feminist, decolonial, and participatory research traditions, our methodology centered relationality, reciprocity, and co-construction of knowledge (Freire [1970] 2000; Smith 2012). The letters themselves became both data (texts to be examined) and analysis (spaces where interpretation and insight were actively formed). Through cycles of writing, rereading, and reflection, we engaged in critical self-examination and developed deeper awareness of our positionalities, power, and responsibilities within the research process (Ellis et al. 2011). This iterative and dialogical process allowed new questions, insights, and actions to emerge organically, emphasizing knowledge as dynamic, situated, and relational.

Ultimately, this approach positions letter writing as an embodied and ethical research practice that bridges art, inquiry and meaning making (Richardson and St. Pierre 2005). The epistolary form enabled us to think, feel, and create in dialogue, producing a layered, living text that reflects both the process and the product of our shared exploration. In doing so, this method honors voice, complexity, and connection, while opening possibilities for transformation within and beyond the academy. We examine the epistolary form as an artistic and relational practice (Altman 1982; Barton and Hall 2000).

2. The Pandemic: Writing in Context

Our letter writing began during the pandemic, which created conditions where relational writing became a methodological lifeline. Letters served as counter-practices to digital overload (Taylor 2021), artifacts of lived and emotional history (Jupp and Slutskaya 2022) and co-regulating practices of care and intellectual companionship (Nicolazzo and Jourian 2021). The pandemic challenged many people to choose between lives and livelihoods. Poor people and people of color were disproportionately affected, sometimes separated from their loved ones as they died. The lockdowns disrupted face to face interac-

tion, collapsing ordinary forms of relational life. Digital communication was immediate but often overwhelming, transactional, or emotionally thin. In some profound manner, the digital communication simultaneously offered a presence of an absence and an absence of a presence.

This time paradoxically offered an opportunity to reflect (Ahmed et al. 2025). In effect, writing slowed down time when the world felt disordered. Letters offered an embodied presence, reminding us how we can be held in each other's thoughts. Our letters sought to embrace slowness and attention. Letter writing became a practice of grounding, meaning making and maintaining human connection across distance and time. Letter writing provided presence and connection.

3. Vulnerability, Witnessing, and Intimacy

Letters are documents of lived history. Our correspondence became both personal and cultural testimony. As we wrote to each other we noted our fears, hopes, frustrations and uncertainties. Unlike when engaging with scholarly literature, we allowed ourselves to enter these emotional spaces. Through our correspondence, a growing sense of intimacy began to emerge. We saw each other up close and shared deep feelings with each other. Our writing was a deliberate, reflective, asynchronous exchange of thoughts, emotions, observations, musings and inquiries about each other. We not only asked questions, but we also questioned the answers submitting ourselves to a constant mutual interest in dialogue and debate. Our letters sought to blend narrative, memory, reflection and intentionality. They sought to extend our interior selves outward toward a relationship and an intimacy of connection. We intentionally suspended academic distance to get to know each other. Letters allowed the space to reveal uncertainty, personal experience, emotional resonance, and evolving thought. One question we both found ourselves using was: "How is your heart?"

Our letters documented, and were anchored in, the personal, familial, social, political and cultural issues of the day. These issues became the fodder for our letters. In fact, the pandemic, vaccine hesitancy, the global refugee crisis, the tragic murder of a family member, the institutional pressures, and the uncertainties of daily life were central as we sought to make sense of the world around us. In some cases, the goal was simply to sit with the senselessness of everything that was happening around us. Our inquiry was also relational: we wanted to know what was going on internally in the other through a practice of relational witnessing. This practice creates solidarity, mutual responsibility, and a shared relational space. Each letter became both testimony and response.

Our letters also show an evolving sense of intimacy. The slow relational rhythm of correspondence helped to cultivate both an intellectual and emotional intimacy between us. Our letters hold affect, critique, reflection and imagination. We pondered together allowing more ponderings to emerge along the way. We realize that even a letter that was never sent held as much value as the one that was sent. The value lay not only in the recipient's response but also in the writer's emotional valence toward the letter.

4. Letter Writing as Dynamic, Dialogic Inquiry

Letters also act as modes of inquiry, a process that invites vulnerability, dialogic engagement, and reflexive knowing. They create knowledge between correspondents. Dialogic inquiry is grounded in Bakhtin's (1981) concept of dialogism, where meaning emerges through responsiveness and exchange. Each letter functions as provisional, and unfinalized, but always in relation to the next. Such dialogic inquiry engages the epistolary method to co-theorize, question, challenge, and accompany one another's thinking (Goldstein 2017;

Wyatt 2011). Our letters sought to engage each other's ideas through ongoing reflection and critical inquiry. Even asking about how hearts felt was engagement in dialogic inquiry.

Bakhtinian dialogism proposes a polyphony of voices which includes the writer's voice, the anticipated voice of the recipient and the echoes of prior voices. Letters capture the depth of feeling and quality of thought among correspondents. Through these letters, we sought to challenge the solitary scholar model, replacing it with a responsive, relational approach. Our own understanding developed through these letters through which we embraced our own vulnerability. The dialogic inquiry also relates to writing as relational reflexivity. Letters thus create opportunities for reflexive spaces shaped by another's presence.

Letter writing is a dynamic form characterized by fragmentation, immediacy and intimacy. Since letters are always unfolding between the writer and the reader, they anticipate response, invite dialogue, and reveal evolution of thought (Boggs 2025). Scholars of epistolary practice emphasize letter writing as a performance of presence, a crafted embodiment of voice (Amiran and Unsworth 1994; Stanley 2004). Barton and Hall (2000) further argue that letters carry social and cultural significance, embedded within practices of care, identity, and connection. Letter writing thus is an art of address, and an art of presence that invite the reader into the thinking and feeling of the writer in reciprocity.

5. Examining Our Letters

What follows are several letters that we wrote to one other over two years. (Although limited to this period, our letter writing continues today). For this article, we limit the discussion to just a few exemplary letters that demonstrate epistolary as art form and method.

In the first letter exchange, dated 23 March 2022 (see Appendix A), Becky reflects on letter writing as an art of contemplation, contrasting it with the speed of email and digital communication. She frames the letter as an intentional act of slowing down—an invitation to engage in thoughtful dialogue that supports deeper understanding, especially in the context of antiracist work. Becky recounts how her relationship with Hugo began. Although they worked at the same institution for years and shared commitments to social justice, they did not truly know each other until tragedy—the murder of Hugo's brother—created the conditions for vulnerability and connection. Becky expresses curiosity about why their paths had not crossed more meaningfully earlier, pointing to academic norms, race, gender, and the lack of models for deep cross-gender and cross-race friendships.

Becky emphasizes that antiracist work depends on genuine relationships, built over time through shared projects (such as organizing a poetry reading), mutual creativity, and repeated exposure. She shares what she has learned about Hugo's life—his family, commitments, writing, and teaching—while acknowledging how partial her knowledge still is. This partiality leads her to reflect on the difficulty of moving from surface-level acquaintance to full, vulnerable friendship. Her letter then shifts into a deeper expression of vulnerability. She describes herself as thin-skinned in a way that aids teaching but feels risky in academic settings. In the same letter, Becky shifts to the world stage and reflects on pressing global issues. She shares her grief about the unequal global treatment of refugees, contrasting the compassionate responses toward Ukrainians with the harsh responses to refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq, Palestine, and Sudan. Her memories of working in Lesvos with people fleeing their countries stay with her in a profound way, leading her to question whether there has been any social progress, especially as she watches contemporary racism and global inequities unfold.

Becky wonders how grief is shared across relationships and asks Hugo what breaks his heart, drawing on Walker's (2010) quote about living as an artist with a broken heart as a way of seeing the world more clearly. Becky also discloses personal grief related to

an interracial romantic relationship troubled by illness, emotional distance, and cultural difference. She worries that hiding such pain from Hugo would interfere with the depth required for authentic cross-race dialogue. She suggests that sharing vulnerabilities, even those not explicitly about race, is essential for relational honesty, especially in antiracist partnerships. In this very first letter to Hugo, Becky reflects on what imagination and creativity might do for their growing friendship and whether writing letters to each other will help them continue exploring what they know, and do not know, about themselves and each other. In a typical epistolary form, Becky extends an invitation for continued mutual witnessing, vulnerability, and deepening connection.

In response to Becky's letter, Hugo is grateful for the depth and generosity Becky shares in her letter. Hugo affirms the epistolary form as a space for contemplative relational exchange and acknowledges the emerging "dance" of mutual learning between them. Hugo reflects on the professional and personal knowledge he has gained about Becky—her writing, scholarship, poetry, and humanitarian commitments—while questioning whether traditional academic expectations should dictate how such knowing unfolds. Hugo expresses admiration for Becky's intellectual and emotional openness.

Our letters seek to capture the hunger and thirst to learn from each other. In one letter, Becky asks Hugo about the tragedy of the murder of his brother and how his heart is doing. Hugo shares his grief in a poem (Poem to Ponsiano, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1h74dGLFN4vYR_mPXZZpK7qSwv4RHZGxV/view, accessed on 9 February 2026). The poem is also a grieving address to a lost brother asking where justice can be found and who has the power to deliver it. Hugo mourns his brother's absence, noting that each day not only marks his loss but underscores the senseless violence that took him. The poem wrestles with larger histories of colonialism and hatred, questioning whether their enduring harms can ever be undone. Yet amid sorrow, Hugo still hears his brother's laughter, resilience, and shared humanity. This remembrance becomes a guiding light, a "bright north star" that connects Hugo, his brother, and a collective hope for justice. Such dynamism can be felt in the poem's tone and emotional intensity.

In response, Hugo asks about Becky's goddaughter Arezu, who once lived with her. Becky shares a painful story of loss: after three years of working to secure a visa, and then two years together, Arezu was expected to return to Boston and begin her junior year of high school. At the last-minute Becky received a call saying Arezu would stay in Portugal to support her family. Becky describes the quiet grief of a room still filled with Arezu's belongings—her stuffed animals, books, Doc Martens, and Farsi dictionary—waiting for a child who will not come back. Becky's descriptions are an invitation to sit with grief in Arezu's room.

Becky also reflects on the fragility of chosen families as she pours out her heart: "I feel a big hole, Hugo. The precarity of families that queer people make, not seeing it coming, this abrupt about face. How the bio family wins and must." Becky describes the quiet mourning scene in which grief takes shape: "The reflection of the window on my wall lets me see the leaves on a garden tree flutter. The branches look like veins. The veins on my hands look like the veins I used to trace on my grandmother's hands. I cannot trace Arezu's hands this year, or the next. This life splits and cleaves." The ethic named and upheld through multiracial feminism, "the personal is political and the political becomes personal," speaks to the intimacy of belonging that shapes one's intimate relations and commitments to the world (Thompson 2001, pp. 368–71).

Elsewhere, Hugo and Becky share their outrage at the inequitable treatment of Black and Brown refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine. Becky's reflections on global refugee inequalities prompt Hugo to revisit his own story of fleeing Uganda emphasizing the fear, isolation, and silence that shaped his journey. Hugo positions storytelling and witnessing as

essential practices for meaning making and resisting erasure, particularly for marginalized peoples. Turning to Becky's account of personal heartbreak, he responds with empathy, affirming that vulnerability not explicitly tied to race still matters for sustaining honest cross-race relationships. Glimpses of his own grief and illness capture his own vulnerability. Hugo concludes by honoring the power of questions, expressing a desire to deepen mutual understanding, and acknowledging letter writing as ongoing, unfinished dialogue.

6. Valuing the Epistolary Method

Our letters enact an epistolary method rooted in vulnerability, relational accountability, and mutual witnessing. We use letter writing to slow down, reflect, and name the inner and outer conditions shaping our lives including anger, uncertainty, loss, grief, violence, academic pressures, and the fragile work of cross-race friendships. This dual orientation toward the self (inner) and the world (outer) positions our letters as a shared contemplative space, a place where personal experience is inseparable from social, cultural, and political realities.

7. Vulnerability as Method

A central theme in our letters is the deliberate choice to write from a place of emotional exposure. Both of us acknowledge losses, fears, longings for connection, and the challenges of sustaining relationships across racialized difference. This willingness to "show one's underbelly" transforms the letters into methodological tools: vulnerability becomes not simply content, but also a structured way of knowing. In this exchange, vulnerability allows us to read the other generously, to risk honesty, and to reflect on how identity shapes perception. It also dares us to enter new territories of vulnerability.

We both reflect on colonization through the eyes of [wa Thiong'o \(1986\)](#) and Frantz Fanon's teaching. In our letters, we note our relationship to colonization. Hugo writes, "Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o chose to stop writing in the language of the oppressor," but quickly adds that "colonial legacies still shape the way we think and express ourselves." For Hugo, the fact that he writes in the language of the colonizer speaks to the colonization of the mind, something that carries shame. Becky reflects on [Fanon's \(\[1952\] 2008\)](#) writing about being caught between two forms of colonization. . .one when the powers that be hold the gun up to your temple. The second, when you learn to hold the gun up to your own temple. Becky writes: "This is what I find myself trying to work on most . . .how I hold the gun up to my own temple, how I am learning to bring the gun to the ground, take out the bullets, throw away the gun entirely. Somehow, I think shame is linked to the holding of the gun. And somehow, I think that letting go of shame is a communal thing—that comes from learning about other people's shame. . .so that shame isn't privatized anymore. So, we can see a buttercup." Both Hugo and Becky show vulnerability as they embrace shame.

8. Mutual Witnessing

The letters demonstrate the epistolary act as a form of witnessing—of oneself, of the other, and of the wider world. This reciprocal witnessing allowed Becky and Hugo to hold the other's experiences with care while also inviting one another into each other's lives. It is a mutual, dialogical practice that builds relational trust, making the letter a space where emotional truth and sociopolitical critique can coexist. In this way, our letters bear witness to personal and collective grief, the enduring impact of racial trauma, and the persistent yearning for a more just world.

In one letter, Becky reflects on the role of witnessing, on how the "here" is always shifting across borders, seas, and checkpoints while the mind struggles to settle enough to bear witness. Becky describes the intensity and awe of working in Lesbos, Greece to

help refugees, where time seemed to stop in 2015, as the memory of watching for rafts still accompany her. Though she was not the one in the boats, she now finds herself again in the position of watcher as others flee across borders. This raises deep questions about the ethics of witnessing and whether watching makes one complicit. Drawing on [Nhat Hanh's \(1999b\)](#), pp. 72–73) poem “Please Call Me by My True Names,” she grapples with the tension between honoring one’s own subject position and acknowledging how experience expands one’s sense of interconnectedness. Echoing Audre Lorde’s call in “A Litany of Survival” (1978), Becky expresses the deep, aching impulse of the witness to speak, even when the story is not their own.

9. Slowness and Reflection

The epistolary form, as an art, is also characterized by the value of slowness and reflection. As our correspondence unfolded, we became aware of the time required to craft a letter, to dwell in its language, and to respond with intention. We contrasted this with the speed of academic life and the flattened relationality of email. The epistolary method creates a temporal refuge—a space where reflective thought can emerge without urgency.

Throughout this process, neither of us felt compelled to respond quickly. On several occasions, one or both of us acknowledged a delay in writing back. We did not want the letters to be on a timeclock, another product in the mandatory capitalist supply chain. We needed time to consider our response and to inhabit the emotional space required to offer one. This contemplative pacing is itself a method: it recalibrates attention, allowing emotional nuance, symbolic imagery, and layered meaning to surface.

10. Writing as Relational Labor

Our letters foreground writing not as a mechanical exchange of information but as a relational act. We wrote with the awareness that the other is reading not just words, but the emotional and intellectual labor contained within them. This attention to audience makes the writing deeply embodied—each letter is a gesture of care, an offering, and an invitation. The epistolary form thus becomes a mode of relational accountability, where language is used to sustain, nurture, and challenge. In true form, we came to appreciate how each one’s words had shaping effects on the other’s words.

11. Interweaving the Personal, Political, and Poetic

Throughout the exchange, our letters draw on literature, poetry, and cultural references ([Walker 2010](#); [Lorde 1984](#); [Woodson 2020](#); [Diaz 2020](#); [Baldwin 1962](#); [wa Thiong'o 1986](#); [Parker 1990](#); [Jackson 2024](#); [Harjo 2000](#); [Wilson 2008](#)) to illuminate experience. These intertextual gestures situate us within intellectual and artistic traditions while grounding our reflections in lived realities. In one letter, Becky reflects about how the stark contrast and varied responses to refugees mimic global inequities. Becky writes weaving the personal, political and poetic: “At the moment, what is weighing heaviest on my heart is the dramatic difference in how people fleeing war from Ukraine are being portrayed in the media and received by neighboring countries versus how people coming from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq, Palestine, and Sudan were treated beginning in 2015 (through Turkey and Libya to Greece and Italy). Where I was in Lesbos families coming across the Aegean Sea were not allowed to stay in hotels, go into shops or restaurants, buy water, get on public transportation, take a taxi, or go to the hospital.” The blending of personal narrative with broader sociopolitical critique (e.g., on anti-Black violence, refugee injustice) demonstrates the epistolary form’s capacity to hold complexity. The letters function as analytic and emotional texts simultaneously—moments of theorizing that emerge from life rather than from abstraction.

12. Writing as Ritual

Our letters can also be characterized as ritual and performance. In a later correspondence, Becky wrote "... I find myself scanning my email for a possible response from you, and thinking about this ritual we are creating, how to frame it beyond ourselves. I keep thinking about how much students seem to resonate when I talk about slow learning, slow reading, and slow lectures and how epistolary, as a form has pause written into it." Indeed, as Hugo states in the poem about his brother: "where lies justice, who doles justice," the refrain of pain can be felt. The poem also echoes the celebration of a life abruptly snatched.

Both of us write about our sleeping rituals growing up. "Whether it is jockeying for space or a sense of intimacy," Becky writes, "Sleeping rituals teach us so much about safety and belonging." Hugo reveals how sleeping required some regular negotiation with only four beds to accommodate nine children. Becky writes about sleeping with her younger sister, even when they eventually had separate beds, this nocturnal sharing, a place of safety and sleepy joy. The depth with which we write about our sleeping rituals underscores our willingness to enter vulnerable spaces toward greater intimacy and connection. Sleeping also signaled intimacy, "sharing celestial love with those we love."

13. Writing as Venerable

Letter writing, as a method, is rooted in a venerable tradition of care and relational accountability. Hardy (2022) distinguishes between "taking care of" and "expressing care about," noting that caring about is grounded in mutuality, equality, reciprocity, and accountability, whereas taking care of often reflects inequality, exploitation, and emotional suppression (p. 31). Hardy further highlights the disproportionate emotional labor placed on People of Color in caregiving relationships with White individuals. Through our correspondence, we became acutely aware of these dynamics and intentionally oriented our exchange toward practices of mutuality and reciprocity.

As Becky reflects in one letter (14 April), our writing was situated within a tradition that centers questioning as a form of care and inquiry. Drawing on Zen Buddhist koans and Pablo Neruda's question poems, our correspondence evolved around generative questions rather than declarative answers. This shared practice culminated in the recurring inquiry, "*How is your heart?*", which functioned as both a methodological anchor and a relational ethic guiding our epistolary exchange.

14. Conclusions

Together, these letters illuminate the power of epistolary writing as a method of inquiry, relational practice, and meaning making. Through vulnerability, mutual witnessing, reflective pacing, dialogical inquiry, and the weaving of personal and political narratives, our writing transforms the letter into a methodological space—one that enables deeper understanding of ourselves, each other, and our sociopolitical contexts. The exchange demonstrates that letter writing is not merely communication; it is an art form, a craft, and a rigorous method for producing embodied, relational, and socially attuned knowledge.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, H.K. and B.T.; Methodology, H.K. and B.T.; Formal analysis, H.K. and B.T.; Resources H.K. and B.T.; Data curation, H.K. and B.T.; Writing—original draft, H.K. and B.T.; Writing—review & editing, H.K. and B.T. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding authors.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A. Letters and Poems

Dear Hugo,

23 March 2022

I have been thinking lately about the epistolary as an art form, how letters used to be a way to stay in real time. . .one person would write and then send a letter, the other would receive, read, contemplate and then send a letter back.

With email, where much passes back and forth so quickly, I wonder what has happened to contemplation, a state of being that seems especially important when trying to make sense out of and intervene against racism. So, I write you now, in honor of old school letters. . .one to you, time to reflect, and hopefully one back to me.

When we started working together last year we barely knew each other, a reality that I have thought about a lot. What kept us from each other these years, given that both of us do international social justice work, that both of us teach about hope, healing and social change? Both of us have children of color. Both of us have been at the same institution for a long time. I wonder how much of us not knowing each other speaks to forms of alienation in academic contexts, where there is rarely a space for in-depth intellectual dialogue? And how much of it is an example of how race and gender play themselves out. There aren't a lot of models for grown men and women who are not lovers or family to develop real friendships. We might acknowledge each other at meetings and maybe make light conversation, but in my experience, going beyond that is rare. In your and my instance, we somehow got "lucky" if you can call that, when tragedy drew us together. . .when your brother was murdered we happened to be on a committee together, I happened to get the courage to ask how you were really doing, you happened to be willing to let me know that you were devastated. And that you had written poems you were willing to share.

I start with this initial connection since I think both of us believe that long term antiracist work starts with and requires genuine relationships. From there, it may be possible to explore how race, gender, sexuality, class, language and other crucial ways we identify ourselves affect what we talk about, what we know. It helps if there is a project in common, in our case, helping to organize a group of people from the Simmons community to do a collective poetry reading (Collective Project 2021). (<https://youtu.be/lenzSU2QzKo>, accessed on 9 February 2026). I think it helps if there isn't just one project. . .but rather exposure to each other over the long run with shared wanting to create together. Through that I have come to know a few things about you. You have a grown daughter who you are really proud of. You have a partner who got very sick unexpectedly last year. You are devoted to your mother, who you visited in the middle of the semester this year, even as you must have been juggling the world to do so. Some of your family lives in Uganda. You have done research with our mutual friend Shelley White in Uganda. (I remember learning that and thinking I would have liked to be part of that project). You take your teaching very seriously—I can feel that just walking into one of your classrooms. You have a book contract with Norton. You have started to write poetry.

As you can see, my sentences are pretty simple, my knowledge is a start but not really fleshed out which I think raises a question about what it takes for friendships to move from snippets of knowledge to in-depth awareness. How many cross-race, cross-gender relationships make that shift? What does it take? My hunch is that it has something to do with vulnerability. This is a quality an increasing number of people in this culture seem to be praising. I am thinking for example of Brené Brown's wildly successful books and podcasts on vulnerability (Brown 2013). Feeling vulnerable seems to come easily to me (which is a blessing and a curse). I have always felt as if my skin is as thin as the fine layer of bark on a birch tree. This is a quality that scares me to share in academic settings around other faculty. It is essential in the classroom—how might one possibly teaching poetry of witness and not feel vulnerable, how to teach about sexual/racial violence and not feel vulnerable? So, I will take the vulnerability plunge, with knowing that all we have is this one precious life, that, to me, is made possible through deep connections.

At the moment, what is weighing heaviest on my heart (it feels like there is a stone sitting below my heart's left and right chamber) is the dramatic difference in how people fleeing war from Ukraine are being portrayed in the media and received by neighboring countries versus how people coming from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq, Palestine, and Sudan were treated beginning in 2015 (through Turkey and Libya to Greece and Italy). Where I was in Lesbos families coming across the Aegean Sea were not allowed to stay in hotels, go into shops or restaurants, buy water, get on public transportation, take a taxi, or go to the hospital. In the first several months before NGOs arrived, people didn't have access to water, diapers, toilets or medicine. That is in stark contrast to people fleeing Ukraine as countries are changing their employment laws overnight so people can start to work. People are taking in whole families, including their pets. Fleeing families have strollers. What we could have given for a stroller in Greece where whole families were walking up mountain passes in the sweltering heat having to carry their babies and young children. (When I came back, I remember wanting to steal strollers that I would see people pushing around, snatch them right up from their relaxed hands.)

Hugo, I am grieving about this. . . I wish I could cry. That would be a relief. It feels risky to let all of the emotion free. Some of the images I have, of walking with people, of their carrying their life on their backs, was from seven years ago now, and it feels like it is still happening. As I am watching certain senators going after Judge Ketanji Brown during the Senate confirmation hearings, I ask, has there been any progress at all, since the Judiciary committee went after Anita Hill? As my goddaughter, Arezu 's attempt to get a student visa in Portugal has now been put on hold, as the government is fast tracking Ukrainians I think. . . progress? Progress?

So what do we do with our grief? As I write I am realizing I assume you grieve too. . . but we haven't really talked about what you grieve about. Alice Walker has a quote about living this life with a broken heart. "A writer's heart, a poet's heart, an artist's heart, a musician's heart is always breaking. It is through that broken window that we see the world: more mysterious, beloved, insane and precious for the sparkling and jagged edges of the smaller enclosure we have escaped." (Walker 2010). Do you live with a broken heart Hugo? What most breaks your heart? Is that a sign of an ally, when we know what breaks each other's hearts?

My heart is breaking too now because of a lover relationship that is crashing into some Covid/cancer mound. . . a crash I hesitate to write about. . . since I feel intimidated with you, as someone in a long term, successful relationship, and me, feeling so unsure and sad about a new connection that I don't think will make it. I know that homophobia can add stresses to gay relationships that straight people escape. I know, theoretically, that there are realities that may just be too big for me to handle (that she has metastatic cancer, is a lone wolf, and doesn't really want me around when she is sick). I can't be a present, loving femme with a butch who wants to do it all herself. So how does this relate to race? Her and my cross-race relationship means there are some cultural differences that were not easy to handle. It is hard to write about this but I have a hunch that if I don't tell you about how my heart is sagging, as my getting Covid has led her to run the other direction, then a big piece of me is hiding. It might not be about race, but hiding anything seems to create walls that will show up when we are talking about race. Does that make sense? So, even big deals in our lives that aren't about race, need to be shared if we want to be able to share deeply about race.

In a lovely interview by the Black lesbian writer Jacqueline Woodson of the Mojave poet Natalie Diaz, Woodson says, "to sit with her is to become aware of both how much I know about the world and myself and how much I don't." (Woodson 2020). Might sitting with each other teach us how much we know and how much we don't? I don't really know about how you got to Simmons and why you stayed. I don't know who you call in the middle of the night? Or maybe you don't. I don't even know if my assumption—that vulnerability and intimacy are the manna for sustained cross-race relationships—is something you share. The writer Allison (1995) has a short novel, *Two or Three Things I Know are True*. Are there some truths that we hold in tandem? Is that even important or is Audre Lorde right that "difference must not only be tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic." (Lorde 1984, p. 111). Is imagination crucial for creativity between people? Is creativity what will keep us writing to each other?

I shall send this on. . .

Dear Becky,

25–26 March 2022

Let me also begin in the old-style manner by thanking you for the gift of your letter and your words which still echo in my ear. The thoughtfulness you brought to it and the way you captured that which you know about me and that you are still grappling to know about me. I see it as the ever-unfolding dance of learning and knowing more. Let the dance begin or maybe it has already begun.

You indeed note well that which we share: our connections in our families and in our professional selves. And you ask important questions. Indeed, how much more there is to know. Yes, tragedy brought us together, but I also hope providence did bring us together too, but where lies that too? Words can be telling but also elusive.

I too have come to know a few things about you. You have done amazing things. You have written several books. You have a forthcoming poetry book, *To Speak in Salt*, winner of the Ex Ophidia Poetry Prize and finalist for the Hollis Summers Poetry Prize. You have written several books including: *Making Mirrors: Righting/Writing by and for Refugees* (2022) (Bseiso and Thompson 2019); *Survivors on the Yoga Mat* (2014) (Thompson 2014); and *Teaching with Tenderness* (2017) (Thompson 2017), a book I have read but we have not even discussed it. But then I ask myself. Do we even need to do that? Is that a lens that is borne out a Western academic bone? So, in a way I have come to know and admire you, and might I say to love you, your work, your spirit and your tenderness as you listen with a deep heart and as you ask about my heart. I know you have written so powerfully about your work with refugees and your deep involvement with your goddaughter, Arezu and her family, your travels during the Lesvos refugee crisis and more. So, I ask myself. Who is this woman? Of course, I got a glimpse of you in *Teaching with Tenderness* and where your heart's desire meets your heart's hunger. I hear your cry and your frustration as refugees flee the horrors of war. At least those who can make it.

I go back and forth between watching these images and shutting myself off from seeing them. . . but I am compelled with my own story and wonder if I do not watch. . . what part will I play as a witness to this story? Yes, the stories and the treatment of people from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq, Palestine, and Sudan in the last few years speak volumes on how humanity chooses to respond. . . Exceptionalism? Progress? American exceptionalism? Maybe exceptionalism is the friction in progress.

It reminds me of my story as I sat in a small, packed van escaping Uganda not knowing what lay ahead. I remember sitting in a minibus with at least fourteen fellow travelers. None of us said a word to each other. Although it was clear we were all escaping Uganda none dared to mention our destination or why we were traveling at that time. We sat motionless, staring into the space that lay ahead of us. As we carefully unwrapped notes of paper currency to pay the driver, we dared not mention that we were crossing the border into Kenya. I still vividly remember sitting nervously in that minivan without daring even to make eye contact with another passenger. No one could be trusted. As much as I wanted to connect with someone on that bumpy ride, our distance from each other, tightly squeezed in such a tight space so close to each other, felt like a necessary protection.

I traveled at night, hitching rides from strangers and walking on foot as I crossed into Kenya with very few belongings. The journey across the border would not allow me to carry much, for fear of detection but also for the uncertainty that lay ahead.

But that was my journey, a journey that continues in many different directions. Today, a similar journey flashes over the screens of our smart phones. Only this time it is very instant. It happens so fast and with it the possibility of being instantly forgotten. I must watch these images regardless of how gruesome they are. I know that when I worked with the young men and women from Sudan they told me that their story needed to be told. It needed to be witnessed and I was one of those witnesses.

As I watch and contemplate the images of people, my people who have been left out in the discourse, I think that meaning making, and by extrapolation storytelling, is a deliberate process through which we ascribe meaning to our experiences, in the process destabilizing the received modes of signification. I am intrigued by the need to tell and retell our stories, and in the moment of witnessing refashion them thus inspiring courage. Indeed, this is what I see constituting history as a tapestry of stories embodying lived experience.

But you bring it close to home. You share something about your love life and the shakiness you have to live with for now. I am touched by the candidness you write about it and the uncertainty that lies ahead. I want you to know that I hear you and hear your cry and depth of feeling even in these murky waters. I will ask you what you have taught me. . . How is your heart, Becky? Your giving voice to this painful uncertain moment is a gift of love. You state: “. . .and it might not be about race, but hiding anything seems to create walls that will show up when we are talking race. Does that make sense?” Yes, it makes sense, and it is so much needed. Indeed, I felt something so deeply moving when I shared with you my partner’s struggle with illness and a moment when I almost lost a finger. I know that I am all my life’s moments: the good, the bad and the ugly.

I love that quote by Jacqueline Woodson. Indeed, how much does our knowing or learning teach us about how much there is to learn. I agree 1000%. Thank you for your questions. I cannot underestimate the power of questions. We have to keep asking questions even if there are no answers. I hope that what we have started will open us to learning more about each other. . . yes about my country, Uganda, my journey to the United States, to Harvard, Boston College, Boston University and to Simmons. I’d like to know more about you. Where do you draw your passion and fire to write, to think, to love? Do you have a stubborn optimism about life as I sometimes think I do? What keeps you going? What makes your soul dance? Where have you drawn courage to shake hands with a love outside of you?

I woke up to finish this letter and now I must send it to you knowing that it is unfinished and to be continued. . . Warmly, Hugo

Hi Becky,

31 March 2022

What word captures my thoughts now?

This is a question that has intrigued me. On one level, I have wondered about a word or set of words that captures who I am. Many words come to mind depending on context and location. The word “tapestry” carries a special meaning for me personally and for the practice of life. I find myself at a crossroad of many stories that shape who I am and where I am. My story has been woven together by the threads of others. I am a tapestry of stories. Stories of home. Stories of identity. Stories of chance encounters. Stories that clients have trusted me to hold. Threads woven together across person, place and time. An intricate, indescribable tapestry.

This, perhaps, is what is most significant for me in thinking about narrative therapy and choosing to write the Norton book, *Narrative practices for resilience and hope: Rewriting trauma stories in clinical work* (Kamya Forthcoming)—the way that narrative therapy recognizes people as multistoried. The plurality of truth and meaning making, the non-pathologizing unknowing stance, the engagement rooted in curious wondering, through which a rich story unfolds.

Another word that captures who I am is curiosity. My curiosity has been the thing that has led to most decisions I have made in my life. It was my curiosity about my own family members that led to my interest in psychology. My curiosity about lifestyles, cultures and ideas has led me through different experiences while I have been engaging in mindful practices. People’s lives are made up of multiple experiences that can be strung together into many possible stories. When people enter therapy, they are often captured in problem saturated, self-demeaning, restricting stories that contribute to a sense of personal failure. That should not be the case.

Now, I must tell you that I am very suspicious of the efforts I see around ivory towers portending to do the work on racism. I see how very well-meaning colleagues take on this monster but there still remains a lot of pushback. I am happy that our mutual friend Johnnie Hamilton-Mason has challenged us to look deeper. But the fact that we have needed to work so hard to get students to participate in cross-cultural conversation leaves me discouraged again. Thank you for reminding me of Nhat Hanh’s (1999a) teaching that the journey is the way. We need to continue owning our story whether they listen or not. I am grateful about the commitment to our work, and I hope our stories continue to evolve.

Reading your letter expanded my storylines. I continue to think of people whose voices are silenced by powers beyond their control. But also, how our stories are enjoined by the experiences that unite us in our shared humanity. When you mentioned recently about how you shared a bed with your sister when you were growing up I was reminded of sharing a bed with my brother, Ponsiano who was brutally murdered a year ago. What a tragic event! I can remember how he kicked and kicked in bed and followed me around as a five-year-old. That intimacy followed in our older years as we talked about everything from religion to politics to sports. My brother loved sports. He talked about the Red Sox and the Celtics. He also talked about the racist policies of the United States dubbed as the land of opportunity. Ponsiano had lived in Germany where he also witnessed racism at the core. He and I had spent long hours talking about where one finds hope amid chaos. Indeed, with the exploitation of resources by the colonizing powers of the West most of Africa was depleted of its potential. How you cared for my heart after Ponsiano was murdered, and your encouragement of me to write a poem for him, led me to this poem, I share with you here. I am reminded of his commitment to justice as his north star of life.

With much love and kind regards,
Hugo

Where lies Justice? To you, my brother, Ponsiano

Where lies justice?

Who doles out justice?

How does justice get served?

I see you as never before

I hear you as never before

I look for you

But cannot find you

I hear your cry for justice

I hear your cry for hope

I know you left us so early

What words remain unsaid between us?

What words remain unspoken among us?

Passing days?

No

Each unpassing day whispers your absence

Each unpassing day announces the senseless horror

Shall we ever take off the shackles of colonialism?

Shall we ever dismantle the chains of hate?

Yet in the whispers of life

I hear your voice

I hear your hearty laughter

I hear your audacity to survive

I hear you

I hear me

I hear you, me, us

And I see that bright north star.

Dear Hugo,

Let me also begin with thank you for your intimate, brave poem for your brother. I have had the gift of getting to hear you read it out loud as well as see it on the page. Thank you, too, for your gorgeous essay, "The Sea of Whiteness" (Kamya 2022). I got to read it yesterday and went to sleep with so many images in my mind, your generosity of spirit, a gift I am humbled to witness. Finding your writing feels like walking around a bend of a country road on a drizzling day, feeling kind of melancholy and then seeing a bright yellow buttercup, its face to the winsome sky.

Your “The Sea of Whiteness” essay gives me a real sense of how lucky the world is to have your words. Your writing speaks to so many audiences—certainly immigrants (which is millions of people, those who know they are and those who have buried that identity in generations of moving forward), and students, mothers and fathers, people who have been forced to flee their homelands (1:88 now, and rising so quickly), people on a spiritual quest, teachers, preachers, and men wearing hats. I had so many emotions reading your essay I had to keep stopping to walk around, stare out my study window, pet my puppy, begin again. First, one of the beloved names for your *Nabalongo*. . . what a word, she who has borne not one, but two sets of twins. Feels so good on the tongue, and knowing that there is a word of praise for women giving the ultimate gift to the world. And that you recently journeyed to Uganda, to see the *Nabalongo* in your life, to keep honoring her as she has faced so much tragedy in the last while.

And then there is your story about the shame you felt not having “enough” chairs growing up and how sleeping required some regular negotiation, four beds between all of you. Your story makes me think about how sleeping rituals reveal so much about safety and belonging. My sister and I always slept together, my long legs often wrapped around her waist. We had twin beds that we would push together and then fight about who would have to sleep in the crack. Even when we had our “own” rooms in junior high school, we still slept together. I somehow knew not to tell people at my (white) school or in the neighborhood about this. . . I somehow knew that was something to keep quiet about. And it was really sad when I started to come out as a lesbian, my sister worrying that maybe we shouldn’t have slept together (that there was something wrong with me being gay). And then my yearning to have company at night all while I have been an adult, feeling ashamed about that somehow. . . that I should be better at being alone, that grown-ups should know how to sleep by ourselves. It was a huge relief when I went to Thailand, to teach at the International Women’s Partnership for Peace and Justice, to learn that children grow up sleeping together and that even when women marry, they may still sleep with women friends. Sleeping rituals teach us so much about safety and belonging. The downside for you, it sounded like, jockeying to be sure there was enough room to stretch your legs, roll over easily. But also, I wonder if there was a kind of intimacy that came from everyone being together. There is something powerful about sharing celestial time with those we love.

Reading “Sea of Whiteness,” took me to so many places. Idi Amin’s megalomaniac murders. . . is that what we are looking at now with Putin? Does history (his-story) inevitably repeat itself? With four million people having already fled from Ukraine. With Putin and his oligarchs bombing nurseries, hospitals, schools, theaters, subways, synagogues? In your letter you talk about questions as so important, creating a space, a pause in thinking, a moment to reflect. Grammar’s contemplation—bigger than a comma, a semicolon. But when it comes to history repeating itself, all I can think of is this year’s week-long ceremonies for Thich Nhat Hahn’s continuation. . . the hundreds of monks singing, chanting, praying, being in silence together, their presence a manifestation of ways of being that come from reprogramming the human psyche, away from violence, toward silence. I am also remembering after going with a group of students to Copley Square where Thich Nhat Hahn led a two-hour silent meditation, how I had jumped on my bike to ride downtown to my favorite Malaysian restaurant, Penang, where I happened to see a group of young monks climbing out of an entirely packed van coming from Copley Square. They were laughing and joking and looking at their cell phones, enjoying the bright afternoon. Might engaged Buddhism offer us ways of being that invite deep peacefulness and laughing while eating cashew yam pots and Bo Bo Cha Cha desserts?

In your essay you cite Thiong’o’s work on colonization of the mind, and I think about Fanon’s ([1952] 2008) teachings, that there are two forms of colonization. . . one when the powers that be hold the gun up to your temple. The second, when you learn to hold the gun up to your own temple. This is what I find myself trying to work on most . . . how I hold the gun up to my own temple, how I am learning to bring the gun to the ground, take out the bullets, throw away the gun entirely. Somehow, I think shame is linked to the holding of the gun. And somehow, I think that letting go of shame is a communal thing—that comes from learning about other people’s shame (not enough chairs in your house) so that shame isn’t privatized anymore. So, we can see the buttercup. Thank you, Hugo.

And then there is serendipity. And there is fate. And there is luck. I mean, what are the odds that you would be sitting on those Harvard steps noticing ants when the very man whose work you were reading comes and sits by you. When I read that story, I pictured Henry Nouwen's name in glitter. And your name in glitter since you were reading, searching, and willing to break out of the shame that often comes with not having money. What are the odds my friend? I am thinking about when I got the call that I had been chosen for a Rockefeller grant in African American Studies at Princeton (for my work on trauma and recovery among African American, Latina and white women). I remember jumping on top of my futon couch, jumping and jumping while I was still on the phone, absolute joy. What were the odds, this white queer girl doing work on sexual abuse and eating problems and racism and healing in the 1990s getting a fellowship at Princeton, to be in the same building with Cornel West and Toni Morrison and Nell Painter and Gayle Pemberton. . . for a whole year. I was such a little guppy, and they are very big fish. While I came there assuming that as a white person, I would need to prove myself in many ways, what I learned is that what qualified me to be there was the quality of my footnotes—i.e., the rigor of my research. Not that race didn't matter and I managed to blow it in terms of my own racism a few times that year. But there was a welcome space to move beyond the confines of whiteness. To read and think and learn and live within the huge expanse that African American Studies offers. I want to praise Henry Nouwen that he knew not to hang on to all his white money. And I want to praise you for studying ants. . . for being upfront about your wanting to study at Harvard Divinity School. When reading "Sea of Whiteness" about the colonization of Africa, the utter destruction of greed and ego that fuels it, I found myself writing on the margins—"my bio family were the missionaries." As a Mormon, my great grandfather had nine wives, each "given" a tract of land that was stolen from the Utes in Utah in the 1800s. Because of polygamy the Mormons were colonizers on speed-dial, a patriarch taking land for all his wives. Ironically, the Mormon's promulgation of white supremacy meant that they didn't allow any black people to be part of the Latter-day Saints for generations until a class action suit risked legal penalty. Then the higher ups received an oracle from god allowing them to accept Black people. . . an oracle that then "allowed" them to begin missions in Africa—Mormons among the most fastest growing white religions in many countries in Africa. There are ironies upon ironies. A few years ago, when I was in Lesbos, one early morning I climbed up a mountain to where we used to watch across the sea for rafts, the coast of Turkey entirely visible from that vantage point, only to find a van of young people, welcoming me, all five of them from Brigham Young University, on a mission in Lesbos. It turns out that Arabic Studies is a very popular major at BYU. It also turns out that among the missionaries coming to Greece, Mormons are the most innocuous since they have been instructed they can proselytize with anyone except for Muslims. For now, Muslims are the latest Black people in the psyche of the Mormon leadership. As I write, I can feel my face tighten, my jaw lock. . . how to name injustice, how to call out damage done, and not somehow become that anger, my outrage. My puppy is starting to warn me that we must go out for a walk and play with a stick. My heating pad turned off a while ago and the sweet drink I have been sipping in the morning (the nectar from boiling carrots, cabbage, and butternut squash) to heal the precious cilia in my face that the Covid vaccines seemed to have wiped out calls me to get up. But, one more thing for now. . . that image, Hugo, of you sitting on that minivan with all the other people also trying to escape to Kenya, the utter silence born of trying to save your lives. . . well I think about Lorde's (1982) "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action" and how sometimes, the silence can't been transformed into language and action for a very long time. I think about Anna Akhmatova's poems "Requiem" (Akhmatova 1997, p. 384) written at the height of the Stalin era, when her son was in prison, her husband killed; how she wrote those poems and then memorized them, asked close friends to memorize them, which they did, for twenty years, they stayed in people's memories until finally they were published outside of Russia. And I think about how now, thousands of journalists and activists and peacemakers have fled Russia in protest. And I think about a scene when I was teaching poetry in a refugee center in Lesbos, and how I said something about how a writer's work is to tell the truth about our lives. And how a brave wise person said at the poetry workshop, "*With all due respect, no one can speak honestly as long as we are here*" (Thompson 2022, p. 21)

So, the “here” changes locations, across borders, seas, check points, rivers, streams. And the mind has to somehow settle enough to chronicle. . .to witness. Which is what you are doing. I crave being able to talk about what I have witnessed in the last years working in Lesbos. . .it is like time stopped for me in 2015. . .my eyes saw way too much. . .I am still watching for rafts. And yet, I was not the one on the raft. Now we are both watching, not ourselves the ones walking across the border from Ukraine to Poland, to Moldova. Do we become complicit by watching? Is that a question that can breathe or is it a stuck interlocutor? I am reminded of Thich Nhat Hahn’s incredible poem, “Please call me by my true names” where he is the young girl raped and thrown over a boat and he is the pirate who raped her (Nhat Hanh 1999b, pp. 74–75). His spiritual practice of interconnectedness raises big questions about needing to name our subject position—only speak from our own perspective in order to avoid colonizing someone’s story, make their story our own somehow. And yet, when our subject position grows, when what we have seen expands, when who we have walked with grows; the witness wants to cry out too.

I look for guidance on this. . .

With so much appreciation, Becky

Dear Hugo,

9 April 2022

You are in Puerto Rico right now and I am in Boston, as Afghan Dari pops up as my computer’s chosen language, until I adjust it to English. That is the script that a refugee-activist in Greece loaded into my computer a few years ago so we could type a translation of Audre Lorde’s “A Litany for Survival” (Lorde 1978, pp. 31–32) and Huang’s (2011, p. 139) “Glossary” for safe keeping after another refugee-activist had made the poems accessible for the class we co-taught on poetry. You and I are both blessed with being able to travel, I think both of us wanting connections that go beyond tourism, that bring people together in long-lasting ways.

Your earlier letter, a beautiful rendering on words that describe you—tapestry, plurality, curiosity—has led you to wonder about words that describe me. I guess that would depend on what moment, what season, but, for the second, one I might lift up is deep feeling. I say that because since I was little, I think I have felt the world deeply. Natalie Diaz has spoken about sensing that the world is in deep trouble since she was very young. And in her latest book, *Postcolonial Love Poem* she asks why she has always been sad? It is a relief when I find people who write/say this, I guess as I come from a culture where we are supposed to be happy, or at least pretend to be so. Diaz suggests that leaning into love, unabashed sexy, open, I-am-your-river-and-you-are-mine love may be an antidote, a brave suggestion. So maybe if I am a river, of course I would feel deeply, the texture of the rocks under and above the water, the cool then warm streams that ribbon the sun’s rays, the dramatic fall in a rapid, the quiet of a pool shallow enough to shelter tadpoles. Deep feeling, like my eyes when I see my friend Chandler still sitting in front of CVS with his paper cup and cigarette, three years now, during the period when he still worked in the dining room part time at Tufts and since after they “let him go” during Covid. “Let him go,” such a euphemism that does not pay for the egg sandwich he likes to get at Dunkin Donuts when the coins add up. Deep feeling, my father, who was a plumber’s helper on his good days, when the drink didn’t win in the mornings, who my grandmother said had the soul of a poet. That is how I remember my father. . .his eyes ones I felt like I could live inside. Maybe I did. A dad who went poof when I was five, gone entirely until he arrived with a Zuni bracelet for me when I was twelve and then, poof gone again. Deep feeling. . .is that another word for love’s loss, love’s attachment?

That expression, getting over loss. . .who is someone kidding? Ponsi, who followed you around when he was five, always following you now. Or is he in front of you, leading? Or coming in and out? Is that lucky, intimacy from another realm? Is that what keeps our spines upright? What helps you get on a plane to Puerto Rico? Then come back safely?

Another word to describe, one you chose too, might be curious. I am curious why few people are making the connection that the proxy war (waged by Russia and Assad on one side, and the US, Israel on the other) in Syria mirrors the one now in Ukraine—the same studied demolition of schools, hospitals and monuments; the same deliberate missiles aim at children; the same razing of neighborhoods. Half the population forced to flee. I am curious about historical amnesia, how it seems to have sped up, to where we don't remember even a few years ago. Does the internet age and deluge of information wipe out memories even faster? When curiosity merges into outrage, does that cancel out imagination? Does imagination require some form of deep feeling that wars make too risky? After the 9/11 terrorism, the first people to write were the poets—Hammad (2002), Clifton (2002), and hefty volumes of poems published within a few months of the devastation (Cohen and Matson 2002). As Russia continues to shell any moving and quiet beings in Ukraine, I turned to Masha Gessen and the Nobel Prize winning journalist, Dmitry Muratov who auctioned off his Nobel prize to raise money for journalists. And many poets. I didn't know that there is an umbilical cord between writers in Ukraine and writers in Boston, the Center on Ukraine at Harvard and the BU journal Agni's founding by a Ukrainian, sustenance for that cord. Maybe curiosity and deep feeling and poetry are synonyms. . .but if so, how come I haven't felt able to write poems for a long time now, over a year? My mentor says I am writing, I am writing. . .it's just not on the page. My muse seems so fickle, unreliable lately. Do I need to swim in more rivers? Or maybe sit by one for a while?

I am so sorry you lost your brother, Hugo. As you write about him now, how he would talk about the Red Sox and Celtics, racism in Germany, the West's pillage in Algeria, the list grows long. . .I wonder what Arezu will see and know once she comes to the US? I have tried to disabuse any notion of sidewalks and gold. We have read about Dominicans' struggles in New York from Elizabeth Acevedo's *Clap When You Land* (Acevedo 2020) and why Rita Dove wrote the poem "Parsley" (Dove 1982). But it is a whole other thing when Arezu will be walking around Dorchester and Cambridge and Jamaica Plain and Downtown Crossing in her own deep feeling skin. The three children I have chosen to walk with (and they me, Trinidadian, Southern Ute/African American, and now Afghan) with their own curiosities their own deep feeling, their own story lines. In an earlier time, I wrote about my experience as a sudden mother of Lamar, when he was eight, which let me keep lovely track of our first year together. *Mothering without a Compass* is a memoir that I wrote in fast snatches and then he read, one chapter at a time, at a restaurant of his choice. Will the muse visit once Arezu comes? Or is the deep feeling no longer finding its river in writing for me? I have always liked the expression, *je ne sais pas*, in French, I don't know, how it feels on the tongue, soft, even in its unknowing.

As for your brave and wise line, "Now I must tell you that I am very suspicious of the efforts I see around the Ivory tower's pretending to do work on racism" this line makes me feel close to you. . .its honesty. You know Patricia Hill Collins' concept of outsider-within, she created to describe black women's positionality within the academy (Collins 1990)? Well, I think that term might locate other people as well, queer people with left politics, a Ugandan-American with a degree in divinity. I am within the institution of Simmons, and for many years now, but I feel outside of it too, and that outsider vision makes me oh so skeptical of what they now call DEI work, an acronym that is very close to DUI, driving under the influence, DEI, heavily under the influence of double speak and dragging in place, of superficial conversation and bloated administrative salaries.

I still think there is something to be said for subversive work, teaching that doesn't use the word antiracism, while foregrounding the writing of people of color, while orchestrating intellectual partnerships among students not slated to really talk across race or class, while pulling white students aside to say, don't bogart your presentation, you can listen more, not make yourself in charge at every turn. I remember when Sangeeta Tyagi and I were finishing our first edited book, *Beyond a Dream Deferred: Multicultural Education and the Politics of Excellence*, and we almost pulled the word multicultural from the title, after learning it was being used in South Africa to justify apartheid, being used in Canada to obscure First Nations right to sovereignty. I think about the first two lines of Pat Parker's poem, "For the white person who wants to be my friend:" The first thing you do is forget that i'm Black./Second, you must never forget that i'm black." (Parker 1990, p. 297). That paradox, that complexity makes me hesitant of newcomers to the antiracism party getting Guggenheims and endowed chairs, surveys testing the climate on campus, most quantitative work. I continue to be in love with the work of Wilson (2008), in his book *Research is Ceremony* and his lectures, that relationality is where it all starts and must stay. The intimacy of remembrance. The intimacy of humility. The intimacy that starts with the land we are on, the rivers that make us.

Love, Becky

Hi Becky,

13 April 2022

Thank you so much for such a beautiful letter.

Thank you for reminding me of the words of Audre Lorde. I love her as you too do and her words are so true. This past week as I walked the streets of San Juan and noted the colonial footprint on this beautiful island I could not help but think of the pain I left back in Boston when a few BIPOC clinicians expressed their frustration of a white passing man whose comments of anti-blackness created such deep insult and injury to a black Haitian woman, a clinician who had been called the “N” word by a family she was trying to help.

Her pain and anger could be felt so far away as she sought to understand the insidiousness of hate and harm. So, even as I travelled far away and basked in the San Juan sun I could not help but think of the daily pain that black skin endures every day, every moment, now. Indeed, Pat Parker’s words could not be any truer. Thank you for reminding me of those words. I remember teaching a course, “Dynamics of Oppression” at Boston College and I would open the class with those words. Indeed, how much louder must a black woman talk to be heard, to be understood. The words of Kendall (2022) as she reflects on the treatment of Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson capture it all. “Pundits. . . continue[d] to dehumanize her, despite having no idea what it feels like to walk this singular path to the highest court in the land as a Black woman.” Yes, those grueling moments were disgusting. How can she continue to swallow these indignities? Jackson (2024) reveals those indignities in her book, *Lovely One*.

Then, I am drawn to think about the raging war in Ukraine. How much longer must this go on? Where lies the end to all of this? I think of stuckness and those early days as a budding clinician, feeling stuck, wanting to do something but unable to deliver. Here’s my most recent letter to Stuckness

Dear Stuckness,

I always saw you as the problem, you reminded me of my inexperience and insecurity as a new clinician. You took on an aversive association—your presence wedged uncomfortably between client and therapist. Client hesitance or resistance is so often intertwined with a feeling of stuckness or being bogged down in the steady march towards therapeutic progress. I was so taken with the stuckness as a commentary on my clinical weakness that I forgot to listen. The ‘resistance’, the ‘hesitance’ has something to say. It speaks to experience and dynamic, in its essence it is rich with cloaked opportunity.

So, I hear you asking me to listen, to call on voices that are silenced and to amplify those voices. I want to write more. I want to explore this phenomenon of stuckness. In part I want to see how one finds deliverance from it. I look forward to our writing. . . I hope we can write poems or letters to stuckness. Do conversations about race feel stuck for you at times? How do you navigate that stuckness? Where do you draw your strength? What has Arezu taught you in these spaces? Many questions, few answers. . . but I will keep asking myself. . .

Dear Hugo,

14–18 April 2022

As we have passed letters back and forth now for the last months, I find myself scanning my email for a possible response from you, and thinking about this ritual we are creating, how to frame it beyond ourselves. I keep thinking about how much students seem to resonate when I talk about slow learning, slow reading, and slow lectures and how epistolary, as a form has pause written into it. When we share about our writing at the upcoming forum, maybe we can talk about how, when the students participating dwindled this year, we turned to our writing as both a way to know each other as intellectuals but also as contemplative practitioners, and how that process has, quite unintentionally, allowed us to celebrate letter writing as a long standing practice between activist/poets. I think for example, of that slim volume of letters between Audre Lorde and Pat Parker from 1974–1989, how their letters got increasingly tender, intimate, as both were living with cancer, Parker dying even younger (45) than Lorde (58). And then there are letters to an imagined audience, Rilke’s (1993) *Letters to a Young Poet* and James Baldwin’s “Letter to my nephew” that was inspiration for Coate’s (2025) *Between the World and Me* and Perry’s (2019) recent, *Breathe: A Letter to My Sons*.

Our writing comes from a venerable tradition Hugo, as we bring our own personalities and subject positions to our words. At the center of our letters are questions we are asking each other, that too, are part of a loving tradition. Many Zen Buddhist koans are based on fundamental questions, designed to provoke more questions, contemplation, enlightenment. Pablo Neruda’s book that he wrote just before he was killed (in 1973) was a book of question poems, ostensibly written for children but now read by people of all ages. Our connection began with the question, how is your heart, one we now ask each other each time we meet.

I have also been musing about these letters as a methodology we are creating, that we can then share with students. We are trying it out together to then pass on (which is such a good idea. . .to try things out before asking students to do it). Our methodology has been a combination of three things, writing letters, writing poetry together based on Huang Fan's poem "Glossary," and meeting regularly to check in. It is interesting to me that Huang Fan, who is a well-known poet in China, an organizer of several poetry festivals and author of many books of poetry, has also been a literature teacher in Nanjing High School. I wonder if he has ever used "Glossary" as a writing prompt for students. As I prepared for teaching at China Women's University in Beijing, I wanted to read as much Chinese poetry as possible. That's how I found "Glossary" in the spectacular collection, *Push Open the Window: Contemporary Poetry from China* (Wang 2011). When you and I created the ritual of choosing fourteen words each week and then defining them, that has given us a chance to share our free associations with each other, to be in a place that is deeper than prose. My mind doesn't seem to work as quickly as yours in making associations. . .or maybe my censor is stronger. But I have enjoyed hearing what each of us has written. . .the sometimes surprising definitions we have created. I am thinking, for example, of your words:

Spoon—The ladle that cradles your mouth.

Sand—that alluvial feeling on my feet and body.

And two I wrote that you liked:

Care—if you're Ukrainian and on the run, not Muslim on a raft.

Harbor—where tears go after a Tsunami.

I have felt this in some poetry workshops, the intimacy that arrives when people are willing to share their free associations with each other, to risk that freedom together. What makes that risk possible is the structure that Huang Fan's poem provides. So, the methodology we are creating comes from finding poems that offer both structure and space for innovation.

Thank you for your letter that you wrote last week, I am imagining on the heels of your class and with jet lag after your travels to San Juan. It strikes me now when people fly, we worry about that they not fall from the sky, but also that they stay safe from Covid. Worries for the world, for each other, seem to be escalating, for us and the younger generation. As Greta Thunberg passionately spoke, "How dare you," that we are now leaving for our children the risk of no butterflies, frantic polar bears, nuclear plants caught in another war (war machines caught in a war). I resonated with the grief you shared, and carried with you to San Juan, about anti-black racism you witnessed in Boston before you left, as I watched, this week as three women of color spoke honestly about colonialist assumptions made by some of the white students in class when discussing Natalie Diaz's latest poems. During and after class, I saw little way to keep a bridge sturdy after the three students of color (Vietnamese, Somali, African American) courageously spoke up. Without a bridge, there was no finding our way back to the text, *Postcolonial Love Poem*. While the students of color were willing to spell out their anger to me after the class somehow Diaz's work got lost nevertheless. I left feeling stuck, the word you write to, that you bring alive in your letter.

Stuck, when I worry that if I directly name the colonialist and racist assumptions in class next week, the white student and some of her cronies will freeze as students of color potentially roll their eyes, having seen that before many times. Stuck when I go away feeling sad about a dynamic that I witnessed in various ways over 25 years of teaching. The good news, that students of color spoke up. Bad news, that they spoke during class with such diplomacy that I don't think that most white students even got it. . .as I sometimes temper my emotions around white students, afraid of retaliation in teaching evaluations. Stuck, how I feel in trying to call out (call in) an African American male scholar I have been co-editing a book with who has expected the three women editors to do the vast majority of the work and then show up for the accolades. What stops us, as women from calling him out? Would I be more likely to name the sexism if he were white? At some point I told one of the white women co-editors I thought it was dysfunctional rescuing to let him slide over and over again. My feeling is she likes young Black people around, even if they are not doing their work, which, to me, is a form of racism. But when he sent a letter recently sharing his excitement about progress on the project (as if he has been in the project the whole time), I didn't write him back—"check your sexism, buddy." My fingers wanted to write. My mind is afraid. . .of. . .then my silence becomes part of the problem. How might we create a friendship Hugo, where we can name sexism and racism when they come up between us? What does that take? This "stuff" eats away at me. It's sunny outside on this marathon Monday but my fingers are cold as I type. I think about lotus blossoms, how they grow out of the mud. Is mud what is stuck that can also be fertile?

One more thought for now. . .as I recently mentioned to you, after years and years of having one or two book projects going at the same time, for the last year, I have been writing very little. I am still shepherding the June Jordan collection, *This Unruly Witness: June Jordan's Legacy* and my book of poetry is still in production. . .but I haven't been writing anything new (which is totally unnerving, as you might guess). So, I am utterly grateful that words between us continue to arrive. My closest friend in the world, Diane Harriford, says that your experiences are helping to open my experiences and vice versa. She says we can tell our stories with a harmonic line, singing in tandem.

May this letter find you safe and with time to listen to your own rhythms.

Tenderly,

Becky

Dear Becky,

First, let me ask your pardon for not reading your last letter before we met. But I want to tell you that it was such a thrill to read your letter and to feel how much your writing resonates with mine and how your thoughts and feelings connect to mine.

I was quickly taken in by the people you named. I thought about a friend who has used the term a "symphony of coincidences" to underscore how connections map upon themselves in complex and amazing ways.

Yes, I have loved the free associations of the words that have brought us together each week. They are creating a tapestry of connection for me and I do trust it touches our hearts.

Thank you for sharing your own stuck moments. I marveled at the way you shared these indignities that continue to hurt. You write: "How might we create a friendship Hugo, where we can name sexism and racism when they come up between us? What does that take?" I thought I should highlight these lines and I hope that when this occurs between us that we are lucid enough to go into those places. By the way, would you use the word "*lucid*?" I need you Becky. . . you see English is not my first language. But there are ways words connect and I have to do a quick Thesaurus search to see if a word makes sense. I know you have said not only once but a couple of times that writing has been elusive to you lately. I too go through those dark empty moments. Should I even use the word "dark?" You can see my editing mind is taking over. I guess your exact words were. . ." as I recently mentioned to you, after years and years of having one or two book projects going at the same time, for the last year, I have been writing very little. "

Here are the San Juan poetry lines that stand out for me. I put yours (*italics*) and mine together.

San Juan—the city that yearns welcome

Could be your mother the city of song

Cobblestones—touching the feet that pound them everyday

Round hearts the foot meets with its precious arch

You left (Se fue!)—without kissing me goodbye

Lost in a flight, sky too open for that loss

Turn—as life begins again to welcome you back to the city of your heart.

The belly is a world around the island's sound

Thank you for your letter, Becky. Today has been such a busy long day. But I wanted to write back to you.

With much love, Hugo

Dear Hugo,

26 April 2022

Thank you for your letter, for writing me even though it was a very busy day when you wrote, as you keep the invisible wire of our correspondence alive, the electricity that buzzes on the page. It's 6:00 a.m. here, I have been awake since 4:00, so early that even the puppy opens one of her eyes as if to say, "Beck, come on, no birds yet, still dark, come on." I wanted to write about your pairing of the Glossary poem about Puerto Rico. I like how you kept both of our lines, side by side, so that the resonance and the dissonance are both there. That works great as a writing methodology. I marvel at innovations made possible when two people come with different approaches (each what the other might not have imagined on their own). Let's do this from now on, when we are doing the Glossary writing, hold the two lines together, a literal and metaphoric approach.

As for lucidity, and English. . . I know I have been at my best with my writing when my mind is in Spanish and English, in two languages (even as my Spanish is much more rudimentary than English, sadly) and how I wish I could have both all of the time. When I am away from Spanish, I feel like my brain is atrophying. . . not only for lack of words, but also part of my personality slips away too, with a sense of possibility that two languages open for me. I am wondering if you feel that atrophy when English is all that is spoken around you? Is your mind happier, more expansive when you can jag back and forth? When is that and with whom can you play with words in two languages? Or is it three for you? My mind feels small in English. I miss my long connection with Cetlalic, the progressive language school in Cuernavaca where I took Simmons students a long time ago now.

I shall write some more later. Thank you for the San Juan pairings Hugo. . . for your letters.

Becky

Dear Hugo,

12 October 2024

When I scan for the dates of our letters, it is shocking to see how much time has slipped away since we last wrote. I write now on the eve of an election that has so many of us considering exit plans from the US if Agent Orange storms his way to the still White House. I write in the aftermath of an avalanche at Simmons, the wide swath of department closings—all part of an assault on the humanities and social sciences across the US—that led you to take your many gifts and accomplishments elsewhere and led me to chair a department of one last year. I write while reading Alexis Pauline Gumbs' spectacular biography, *Survival is a Promise: The Eternal Life of Audre Lorde*, where she celebrates Lorde's many epistolary collaborations including with Pat Parker, *Sister Love: The Letters of Pat Parker and Audre Lorde, 1974–1989*, and Lorde's many letters back and forth with Adrienne Rich, June Jordan, Essex Hemphill and many others. In *Survival is a Promise* Gumbs writes, "When light reaches a reflective circle, it bounces." (388), a line that led me to get paper in early hours of this already cold autumn day, in hopes that we might bounce light back and forth again.

I write to you knowing that since we wrote, you nursed a painful injury to your shoulder and I broke my patella, the shoulder a body part you have used to carry so much world, a knee that, my yoga teacher Angela Farmer has said is the body part that hurts when we don't know our direction in life, when we could go in multiple directions but are unsure of where we are. Your shoulder Hugo, that carries your trips back and forth to Uganda to see your mother, that carries you to serve on a dissertation committee for a woman working on the children of survivors of the genocide in Rwanda, she herself one precious survivor, an identity she waited to name until the end of her dissertation defense. What does it mean when we need to hide the very part of our identities that help us bounce in the light. You, my friend, with your strong shoulders. Me, with a patella that is now healed, made possible by five weeks of canceling most everything so that the fracture could open wider than the initial break to let the new calcium flow into that space. Then, the gym to work my way up to pushing the sled again, hot and sweaty yoga, and taking stairs two feet at a time and now, bouncing again.

Our getting to heal with light and air around us as more than 40,000 people have been killed in Gaza, their houses looking for shelter, their books wanting to escape, the rubble, a torment burying children. How to live in a world that seems bent on destruction. You say, storytelling matters. Poetry matters. Witnessing matters. Did you know that when the surface of the earth had very little oxygen the one-celled life breathed ash (Gumbs 2020, p. 369)? With Israel's war machine, stocked by US missiles, thousands now breath ash. As you, Hugo, walk alongside a woman researching the resilience of survivors of the genocide in Rwanda. Is Thich Nhat Hahn right, that we need to completely remake the human psyche, one community at a time, meditate and sing through all seasons to teach ourselves to start and end from a place of peace?

I write, Hugo, knowing better than ever why Joni Mitchell's song Both Sides Now continues to be sung all over the world, as she ends with, "I don't know love at all." Her life as a painter and musician brought her to a humble place of not knowing. How can we teach, Hugo as our not-knowing increases? How can we teach from a place of hope when so much of the world breathes ash?

One story for now. . .it is a love story, a fairy tale. . .of a woman in Lesvos who met a family from Afghanistan, the mother a translator and activist, who asked if her exceptionally smart daughter might come to study in the US for her high school years. The request took four visa attempts, for a girl who sang “twinkle twinkle little star” while we walked hand in hand on the sea road where her family’s raft had arrived from Turkey the year before. The girl Arezu, who did come to live with me, did go to the International School of Boston, did study quantum physics and DNA structures, and Chimamanda Adiche’s novels. Did live with me for two years, was slated to start her junior year a month ago, when I got a call, on the day of her intended arrival back to the US, that she was staying with her family. To care for her sister. To care for her mother. To start school there in Portugal. Her room here waits with all her stuffed animals and rows of books and Doc Martens and a Farsi dictionary. Arezu, whose story from Afghanistan to Turkey to Greece to Portugal you followed as we worked to get her student visa. Now with her family, looking for a school in Portugal where she can study. I feel a big hole, Hugo. The precarity of families that queer people make, not seeing it coming, this abrupt about face. How the bio family wins and must. In the early morning, in my bedroom, the reflection of the window on my wall lets me see the leaves on a garden tree flutter. The branches look like veins. The veins on my hands look like the veins I used to trace on my grandmother’s hands. I cannot trace Arezu’s hands this year, or the next. This life splits and cleaves. I come to the classroom this fall as I am witnessing students coming out of the fog and isolation of Covid, find their courage to speak about their dreams and horrors. I imagine Arezu, this fairy tale girl in my life, coming with me to class this year, asking the students if they know where Afghanistan is on a map? Asking if they know the song *Porcelain*? This girl, almost woman, I am so proud of. Hugo, how to live a life with open hands? How to teach from a listening place? How to hold ash?

Write when you can.

Peace and tenderness,

Becky

Dear Becky,

10 July 2025

The words of Frantz Fanon continue to echo in my mind: “Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country” (Fanon [1952] 2008, p. 18). No wonder [wa Thiong’o \(1986\)](#) chose to stop writing in the language of the oppressor. Colonial legacies still shape the way we think and express ourselves. Even as I write this letter, I am acutely aware of how deeply I remain tethered to the colonizer’s language. And yet, I must write.

This letter may seem to leap from thought to thought, perhaps reflecting the layered complexity of what I hope to share—so much we both want to know. But love and care are not bound by knowledge alone. As I reread our letters, I’m struck by this epistolary act of care. I’m grateful—to you, and to the wisdom that our exchange continues to generate. Your deep listening moved me, especially as I honored the memory of my brother, in the poem, entitled, “Where Lies Justice.” I was—and still am—wrestling with the weight of that loss and the search for justice. Ponsi’s memory lives on with vivid clarity—as alive today as in every moment he shared with our mother, now both reunited in the embrace of eternity.

Ponsi’s struggle resonates with the ongoing plight of refugees—and of immigrant children torn from their mothers’ arms, their mothers’ breasts, their futures uncertain. As my friend Stephanie once said, *refugees never say goodbye*. How can they, when their very tomorrow depends on a collective *we*?

A warm smile crossed my face as I reflected on the audacity and grace of Ketanji Brown Jackson—newly appointed yet entering with a presence powerful enough to stir that august institution. How deeply we need her voice now, and in the days ahead. Her humility is refreshing, yet she speaks with a boldness even those long seated before her dared not show.

I keep Justice Jackson’s book, *Lovely One* (2024), on my shelf as a personal reminder of the work still to be done. Yes—we need to be reminded of where we come from and inspired by what we still can do.

Becky, may we continue this exchange of letters in the days ahead. May you nudge me, as I hope you’ll allow me to nudge you, in this shared practice of care, love and storytelling. May we continue to think small and large things as our minds keep walking and embracing the mystery that lies beyond us. As Harjo tells us “a human mind is small.” With warmth and gratitude,

Hugo

Glossary poem (Hugo and Becky) after Huang Fan

Wild—	A gift our first moment of life craves
Mirrors—	That which reflects our fears and our hopes
Desire—	A heart's hunger meeting one's hopes
Bubbles—	Children blowing colors on a saxophone day
Sleep—	Only safe if it ends
Fork—	Not clear where to turn
Swallow—	A double tailed bird returning each year
Fantasy—	Where lies your beckoning
Taste—	Feeling your savory on my lips
Adventure—	One moment into the unknown
Grief—	This blanket right here

References

- Acevedo, Elizabeth. 2020. *Clap When You Land*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Ahmed, Zhara, Anita Chari, and Becky Thompson. 2025. Our skins are membranes, not walls: A multiracial conversation. In *Contemplative Practices and Acts of Resistance in Higher Education: Narratives Towards Wholeness*. New York: Routledge.
- Akhmatova, Anna. 1997. *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*. Edited by Roberta Reeder. Translated by Judith Hemschemeyer. Brookline: Zephyr Press.
- Allison, Dorothy. 1995. *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. New York: Dutton.
- Altman, Janet Gurkin. 1982. *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Amiran, Eyal, and John Unsworth, eds. 1994. *Essays in Epistolary Theory*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 2012. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4th ed. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books. First published 1987.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Carly Emerson, and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Baldwin, James. 1962. Letter to my nephew. *The Progressive*, December 1.
- Barton, David, and Nigel Hall, eds. 2000. *Letter Writing as a Social Practice*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Boggs, Nicolas. 2025. *Baldwin: A Love Story*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Brown, Brené. 2013. *Power of Vulnerability: Authenticity, Connection and Courage*. Louisville: Sounds True.
- Bseiso, Jehan, and Becky Thompson, eds. 2019. *Making Mirrors: Righting/Writing by and for Refugees*. Northampton: Interlink.
- Clifton, Lucille. 2002. September suite. In *September 11, 2001: American Writers Respond*. Edited by W. Heyen. Wilkes-Barre: Etruscan Press.
- Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 2025. *Between the World and Me*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.
- Cohen, Allen, and Clive Matson, eds. 2002. *An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind: Poets on 9/11*. Berkeley: Regent Press.
- Collective Project. 2021. Truth, Racial Healing and Undoing Racism Poetry Reading. (2021 May 6). *YouTube*. Available online: <https://youtu.be/lenzSU2QzKo> (accessed on 9 February 2026).
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.
- Diaz, Natalie. 2020. *Postcolonial Love Poem*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press.
- Dove, Rita. 1982. Parsley. In *Museum*. Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press.
- Ellis, Carolyn, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur. P. Bochner. 2011. Autoethnography: An overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12: 10.
- Fanon, Frantz. 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by R. Philcox. New York: Grove Press. First published 1952.
- Freire, Paulo. 2000. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed. New York: Continuum. First published 1970.
- Goldstein, Tara. 2017. Epistolary inquiry as co-method. *Qualitative Studies in Education* 30: 341–56.
- Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. 2020. *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*. Emergent Strategy Series; Chico: AK Press.
- Hammad, Suheir. 2002. First writing since. In *An Eye for an Eye Makes the Whole World Blind: Poets on 9/11*. Edited by Allen. Cohen and Clyde Matson. Berkeley: Regent Press.
- Hardy, Kenneth. 2022. *The Enduring, Invisible and Ubiquitous Centrality of Whiteness*. New York: Norton.
- Harjo, Joy. 2000. *A Map to the Next World*. New York: Norton.
- Hooks, Bell. 1991. *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston: South End Press.
- Huang, Fan. 2011. Glossary. In *Push Open the Window: Contemporary Poetry from China*. Edited by Quingping Wang. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon, p. 139.
- Jackson, Ketanji Brown. 2024. *Lovely One: A Memoir*. New York: Random House.

- Jupp, Jacqueline, and Natalia Slutskaia. 2022. Epistolary research in pandemic times: Writing, witnessing, surviving. *Qualitative Research Journal* 22: 420–38.
- Kamya, Hugo. 2022. Finding my voice as a Black immigrant: Reclaiming self in a sea of whiteness. In *The Enduring, Invisible and Ubiquitous Centrality of Whiteness*. Edited by Kenneth Hardy. New York: Norton.
- Kamya, Hugo. Forthcoming. *Narrative Practices for Resilience and Hope: Rewriting Stories of Trauma in Clinical Work*. New York: Norton.
- Kendall, Mikki. 2022. What Black women saw at Ketanji Brown Jackson's confirmation hearings. *Time*, April 21.
- Lorde, Audre. 1978. A litany for survival. In *The Black Unicorn*. New York: Norton.
- Lorde, Audre. 1982. The transformation of silence into language and action. In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg: Crossing Press, pp. 40–44.
- Lorde, Audre. 1984. *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg: Crossing Press.
- Menakem, Resmaa. 2017. *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. Los Vegas: Central Recovery Press.
- Nhat Hanh, Thich. 1999a. *Call Me by My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh*. Berkeley: Parallax Press.
- Nhat Hanh, Thich. 1999b. Please call me by my true names. In *Call Me by My True Names*. Berkeley: Parallax Press.
- Nicolazzo, Z., and T. Jourian. 2021. Trans epistolary methodologies in pandemic times. *Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs* 5: 12–28.
- Parker, Pat. 1990. For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend. In *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Women of Color*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute.
- Perry, Imani. 2019. *Breathe: A Letter to My Sons*. Boston: Beacon.
- Richardson, Laurel, and Elizabeth. A. St. Pierre. 2005. Writing: A method of inquiry. In *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed. Edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna. S. Lincoln. London: Sage, pp. 959–78.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. 1993. *Letters to a Young Poet*. Translated by Mary D. Herten. New York: Norton.
- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 2012. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. London: Zed Books.
- Stanley, Liz. 2004. *The Epistolary Imagination: Letters and the Author*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Taylor, Stephanie. 2021. Slow scholarship in a time of crisis. *Journal of Academic Life* 9: 1–15.
- Thompson, Becky. 2001. *A Promise and A Way of Life*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Thompson, Becky. 2014. *Survivors on the Yoga Mat: Stories for Those Healing from Trauma*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.
- Thompson, Becky. 2017. *Teaching with Tenderness: Toward an Embodied Practice (Transformations: Womanist, Feminist, and Indigenous Studies)*. Champaign: University of Illinois.
- Thompson, Becky. 2022. *To Speak in Salt*. Omaha: Ex Ophidia Press.
- van der Kolk, Bessel. A. 2014. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York: Viking.
- Walker, Alice. 2010. Edwidge Danticat, the quiet stream. Facebook, January 23.
- Wang, Qiang, ed. 2011. *Push Open the Window: Contemporary Poetry from China*. Sylvia Li-chun Lin, and Howard Goldblatt, trans. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press.
- wa Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ. 1986. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Wilson, Shawn. 2008. *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Newberg: Fernwood.
- Woodson, Jacqueline. 2020. Energy. *Poets and Writers*, March/April 31.
- Wyatt, Jonathan. 2011. *The Intimate Reader: Epistolary Reflexivity in Relational Research*. Lausanne: Peter Lang.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.