

*in memory of Will Marquess, who began every class with a poem*

**Nurturing the Language of the Imagination in Michelle Kuo's Memoir, *Reading with Patrick: a Teacher, a Student, and a Life-Changing Friendship***

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Welcome to the class of 2024. It is a great pleasure to take part in the Saint Michael's tradition of faculty reflections on the common text. I will start by noting that before I had begun Michelle Kuo's memoir *Reading with Patrick: a Teacher, a Student and a Life-Changing Friendship*, I had been attracted to the book by the promise of its title. Although, as an English professor, I might say that I have "taught" a particular novel or poem, the phrase "reading with" comes closer to describing what I appreciate most in my work with students. Beyond conveying a body of knowledge or a set of skills, I see my task as creating the space in which open-ended conversations can happen, and new things discovered about ourselves through what we are reading together.

The focus of the title on process and experience rather than on a particular tangible result (or "outcome") might, additionally, suggest a desire on Kuo's part to differentiate her story from the familiar and persistent narrative of teacher as hero, so popular in fiction, memoirs and films. Throughout her memoir, Kuo is aware of versions of that story celebrating the role of a person of privilege, usually white, "making a difference" in the life and success of young people from a marginalized group, usually Black, in spite of the bigger issues of indifferent institutions, poverty, and systemic racism. Kuo is careful to make sure that, unlike those too-often hollowly feel-good stories, her own account of teaching doesn't overstate her influence either when she is first at the school, Stars, or later when she returns to teaching Patrick, this time for seven months

in the county jail. In fact, Kuo reminds her readers that the most important part of her story occurs only after her initial failure to make the difference she might have made had she stayed in the Delta longer. Since publishing the book, she has said in interviews what she implies throughout: that her return to the Delta, on her own, no longer under the auspices of Teach for America, was an act of contrition, an acknowledgement that the educational system she had worked in had failed Patrick and almost all the students at Stars by not addressing or providing the conditions essential for them to thrive. Instead of depicting easy victories over what are in truth huge systemic problems, Kuo stresses how hard it was for her to create such conditions even fleetingly, how much had to happen both to her and to Patrick for her to be able to commit to trying to help, as well as the irony that the space for learning that she and Patrick create together is inside a jail rather than a classroom. Kuo's return to the Delta underlines her recognition that, as long as she confined herself to the conventional paths of opportunity offered to her, nothing would change for the young people she hoped to serve. In fact, those opportunities, whether it was Teach for America or law school, seemed designed as much with *her* career trajectory in mind as with what they might allow her to contribute to the lives of others. Once back, she keeps her focus trained on what she can actually offer out of her unique experience and identity. In addition to her particular perspective as an Asian-American, she can offer her attention, her love of literature, and her faith in the imagination and language as a path to self-knowledge and empowerment.

For the rest of this essay, I would like to focus on what makes Kuo's treatment of reading and writing, both her own and what she shares with Patrick, so worthy of our attention, and to do so by way of Kuo's epigraph from the great African American novelist, Toni Morrison. An excerpt from Toni Morrison's 1993 Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech follows Kuo's dedication of

the book to her parents, and both greet us before we begin reading Kuo's own story. As she goes on to tell us, Kuo owes much of her success in education to the sacrifices her parents made, as new immigrants from Taiwan. The epigraph from Toni Morrison speaks to another debt and source of inspiration. Throughout high school and college, Kuo tells us, her reading African-American thinkers and Civil Rights leaders shaped her sense of responsibility and purpose. The work of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and James Baldwin provided the foundation for her interest in social justice and activism. Morrison's Nobel Lecture speaks about history and about racism, but, importantly for Kuo's project, testifies to storytelling, to sustaining language as a creative force and gift to be given from one generation to the next, which Morrison compares to a bird held lovingly in the hand and passed on alive and unharmed. Reading Kuo's story within the context of Morrison's speech helps us understand the urgency of Kuo's work with Patrick, and the sense we get from it that reading poems together, far from simply offering a distraction from the hardships of jail, feels like the most important thing they could be doing.

Morrison addresses the history and legacy of slavery and argues that systemic racism is sustained by the languages of power. "Oppressive language," Morrison says, "does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge."<sup>1</sup> She goes on to say that "no intellectual mercenary, nor insatiable dictator, no paid-for politician or demagogue, no counterfeit journalist" will be swayed by her critique; instead, inevitably: "There is and will be rousing language to keep citizens armed and arming; slaughtered and slaughtering in the malls, courthouses, post offices, playgrounds, bedrooms and boulevards; stirring, memorializing language to mask the pity and waste of needless death."

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<sup>1</sup> Morrison's speech is available here: [www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/speech/](http://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/speech/).

Morrison denounces language used to deceive, to belittle, to obscure, to inflame, and to gloss over, and her argument suggests that the kind of critical thinking that you will work hard to hone in your college classes will be of great help in learning to spot the lie, the obfuscating platitude, and the serpentine argument designed to conceal “nefarious purposes.” But, crucially, she points beyond critical to creative thinking in language that is as alive as the world it seeks to manifest. Such language, she suggests, necessarily has a tentative, improvised and unfinished quality: “The vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers... It arcs toward the place where meaning may lie.”

Morrison uses the Gettysburg address to illustrate her point. In it Lincoln resists offering hollow assurances, and instead makes very modest claims for what language can do. Morrison says:

When a President of the United States thought about the graveyard his country had become, and said, “The world will little note nor long remember what we say here. But it will never forget what they did here,” his simple words are exhilarating in their life-sustaining properties because they refused to encapsulate the reality of 600,000 dead men in a cataclysmic race war. Refusing to monumentalize, disdaining the “final word,” the precise “summing up,” acknowledging their “poor power to add or detract,” his words signal deference to the uncapturability of the life it mourns... It is the deference that moves [us], the recognition that language can never live up to life once and for all. Nor should it. Language can never “pin down” slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity is in its reach toward the ineffable.

Here, Morrison may seem to be suggesting that Lincoln should be praised for recognizing that words inevitably fail in the face of catastrophe, but, in fact, she is praising his having crafted an understated and restrained language through which to “arc toward the place” where the meaning and scope of that catastrophe lie, without trying to pin it down or have his be the final word.

While it is certain that her speech expresses Morrison’s own attitudes toward history and language, from the beginning of her lecture she has made her views part of a story, a perennial one she says has taken many forms. In the version she says she knows, an old, blind, wise

woman, “black, daughter of slaves, American” is approached by young people whose questions appear at first to be mocking her “clairvoyance” and her wisdom. In response, she lectures them about their responsibilities, responsibilities Morrison interprets as being about language. She is wary and self-protective in her response to the young people’s challenge. But then, Morrison wonders if the old woman might have misunderstood the young people; they might, in fact, have been sincere in their desire for the old woman’s guidance and wisdom. It is their response to the old woman’s words that Kuo excerpts for her epigraph:

“Stop thinking about saving your face. Think of our lives and tell us your particularized world. Make up a story. Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created. We will not blame you if your reach exceeds your grasp; if love so ignites your words they go down in flames and nothing is left but their scald. Or if, with the reticence of a surgeon’s hands, your words suture only the places where blood might flow. We know you can never do it properly—once and for all. Passion is never enough; neither is skill. But try. For our sake and yours forget your name in the street; tell us what the world has been to you in the dark places and in the light...Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names. Language alone is meditation.”

In the course of pleading with the old woman, the young people find themselves imagining the very story they had wanted to hear, and, in doing so, they demonstrate that their engagement with her, as fraught as it had seemed, ultimately inspired their own courageous attempts to keep language alive through a new story. Just as Lincoln was right not to try to use his words to sum up or pin down the meaning of the deaths he commemorates, they recognize that stories cannot ever be told *once and for all*, and that it is up to them to question, contest, nurture, revise, and imagine afresh the evolving tradition of stories. The fact that Morrison ends her speech with the old woman’s saying to the young people “look what we have made together” confirms that, however alone writers and storytellers might feel, their accomplishments are ultimately shared and collaborative.

Of course, it isn’t possible to know for sure whether Kuo chose this epigraph because she identifies with the old woman or with the young people, or in what way it might specifically

speak to her friendship with Patrick. But the memoir appears to offer her attempt to live up to Morrison's hopes for sustaining vital forms of expression and for passing them on. Kuo will *try* not to worry about "saving [her] face." She will *try* to tell the story of her "particularized life" including her blunders and her need for contrition, because, at its heart, her story is her attempt to participate in the tradition of passing on stories of honest struggle.

Poetry is the foundation on which Kuo and Patrick build. Beginning with haiku, they immerse themselves in the form's concentration on images, and its capacity to convey moods and ideas chiefly through sense impressions. Poems, generally, invite us to find ourselves in them, though not in any simple or direct way. For Patrick, the haikus they read evoke memories of all the kinds of weather, particularly rain, which Patrick is denied access to in jail. Reading haikus also helps him imagine landscapes he has not yet experienced (168-170). When they move on to Yeats' poem, "He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven," Kuo assumes Patrick's favorite line will be one that corresponds most closely to his own life: "But I, being poor, have only my dreams," and is surprised when he chooses the line "The blue and the dim and the dark cloths" for the way it evokes the sky at night (176).

I was particularly drawn to this exchange because it reminded me of all the times in class when I have been overly interested in our understanding the "meaning" of a poem—how it can be paraphrased—forgetting that it "means" on many levels, and that staying open to those levels is crucial to appreciating what poetry encourages its readers to experience. In those moments when I appear obsessed with content, a student will say something like, "well, I'm not sure of the answer to your question, but I do know I love the way that line sounds." Paying attention to the extra-content qualities of language in this way does not represent a retreat from reality into a purely aesthetic realm, but rather an expansion of what we notice and are sensitive to, and can

help lay the groundwork for all kinds of knowledge and action. Picturing what poets describe means exercising the invisible muscles of the imagination— gaining the ability to see something not physically before us, to connect what we see to something else—imagining something beyond what already is. The fruits of their work are evident when Kuo brings a bright yellow ginkgo leaf to show Patrick, and he says, “It got some sun in it.” She says she’s not sure “whether he meant it was golden, like streaks or spots of sun, or whether he meant it had literally been shone on” (170). The implied metaphor of the sun in the leaf does just what Morrison says language should try to do—it pins nothing down, but imagines connections and arcs to where the meanings of such connections may lie, even if those meanings are ultimately ineffable. Patrick’s ability to create fresh images and use language poetically are evidenced by the poem she closes the book with. “I taught myself to be free” conveys its ideas largely through evocative images, with the title/first line our guide to their significance.

Writing can and should be the natural fruit of reading. The rhythms and cadences of well-crafted sentences absorbed in the body can with practice contribute to the development of one’s own unique voice. For example, Patrick draws on an experience Kuo shared with him about canoeing on the Mississippi to imagine for his daughter a trip the two of them might take some time in the future. Astonished by the beauty of Patrick’s description, Kuo says: “I was searching for myself, for deposits of our conversations, memories he’d shared or words I taught him. But I was barely there. Each word felt like a tiny impulsive root, proof of a mysterious force that exceeded me” (242). Whether in poems or in letters to his daughter, Patrick has learned, as Toni Morrison says, that “Word-work is sublime...because it is generative” and gives him access to the “mysterious force” of creativity and the imagination. The last text they read together, *The Fire Next Time* (1962) by the African-American novelist, essayist, and Civil Rights leader James

Baldwin, includes an essay written in the form of a letter to his nephew. Like the long tradition of public letters that Baldwin's writing comes out of, his letter is simultaneously a deeply private expression of love and worry, and a public cry of outrage, conveying with passionate clarity the despair he feels about the America his nephew is inheriting and will struggle to survive in. It was galvanizing texts such as this one that Kuo had come to the Delta to teach, not realizing then how much preparation in self-knowledge was required to be able to receive them. Reading Baldwin's letter in many ways represents the culmination of their work together.

As we know from the final chapter, Patrick's accomplishment doesn't change how hard it is for him to find a job and support himself and his daughter once he gets out of prison. The number of pages Kuo devotes to acknowledging the help she received over the years from seemingly countless friends, editors, and institutions contrasts sharply with how little help, beyond his family and Kuo, there was for Patrick at any stage of his life. Though she and Patrick clearly have an inspiring and life-changing friendship, it can't erase the huge disparities between their positions and opportunities. Given their different situations, it is not surprising that Kuo ends her narrative thinking about how things could have been different for Patrick had she stayed in the Delta the first time and kept her promise to be there until he graduated. She feels haunted by her decision just as Patrick feels haunted by the man whose life he took. She asks herself: "Does everybody have such a moment, a juncture or place to which they return, to which they say *Come back to life*, so that we go on with our lives, sustaining our shadow selves, spirit-beings who talk to us and also punish us?" (276). After this reflection, she allows herself to imagine different possible ways her staying might have prevented the killing, always reminding herself not to exaggerate her role in Patrick's life. In this poignant and melancholy moment, I hear echoes of Toni Morrison, especially her novel *Beloved*, where she explores lives haunted by

“shadow selves, spirit-beings who talk to us and also punish us.” Nevertheless, like Morrison, Kuo defends the act of imagining what could have happened, as well as what must be reckoned with as a way of staying open to a future of stories still to be imagined.

#### Works Cited

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