

*MAKING OUR WORDS MATTER:
REAWAKENING THE RADICAL IMAGINATION*

To the dreamers, drifters, and shape shifters of past, present, and future:

PART I: IN THE BEGINNING

"Wholeness is never lost, it is only forgotten." - Rachel Naomi Remen

"The imagination knows all stories before they are told." - William Carlos Williams

We build our worlds with words, gathered and shored from scraps of experience, observation, and sensation, rendered both jagged and polished by the ravages of time. Primitive emotions compose our prelinguistic mode of processing, sweeping us up in their raw and rough-hewn currents. A fullness, embodiment, the pulse of life itself, courses through us, vivifying, blurring, and blunting the edges of human existence. Our animate interior becomes a vessel for experience prior to expression, and our imaginations the architects of an inner landscape of supple beauty and grace.

Our originary state is one of immediacy, of full-tilt immersion. Everything is the here, the now, the all-consuming present. Piecing together the cacophony of sounds and sights buzzing and swirling, we form words, giving shape and voice to inchoate matter, to the figments and fragments that constitute the granular contours of our imagination.

From words, we build worlds.

But words also build walls. Language marks our initiation into definition, differentiation, and demarcation. The red thing that delights us with each bounce and toss is labeled a ball. The consciousness that recognizes and names the ball is designated "I." Everyone else is "they." The lines are drawn. The stage is set. Bit by bit, the mystery unravels as the world is split into starkness and codification, a language of synonyms and antonyms.

What gets lost in translation resides in imagination. There, we dwell in three dimensions; we access fluidity; we speak in past, present, and future tense.

As we grow older, the audacious act of world and word-building is chastened, pressed within the folds and creases of inherited language and ideas. The fertile trove of our most renewable resource, the font of imagination, often lies dormant. We are exiles, migrants in search of a lost Eden. How do we reawaken this quickening current? How do we return home? How do we activate our interiors to enlarge the scope of our perception and deepen our connection to ourselves and to others? How do we learn to nurture, value, and uphold our unique perspectives and infuse our shared world with the richness and dynamism of our imaginations? Capable of converting “*the very pulses of air into revelations*,”¹ this expressive exhalation is as vital as breath. A collective resuscitation is needed.

Imagination: a universal possession and yet incontrovertible evidence of our individual imprint. It embraces dualities, contradictions, ambivalences, ambiguities, encompassing domains of experience and expression beyond the scope of linguistic containment and compression. And yet how can a thing that is marked by its very fixity, its isolation within a particular body, be defined equally by ceaseless mobility, by its refusal to concede to boundaries of any kind? How can its attachment to an individual sensibility serve simultaneously as a conduit for radical communion with the entire field of humanity? As a refuge from linearity, geography, and classification, imagination’s relative autonomy inspires raucous play and quiet contemplation alike. A vessel with no shape, a time without beginning or end, this interior landscape imbues our lives and social bonds with richness and depth, linking them through encounters at communication’s outer edges.

We hurtle through life, encouraged to “catch up,” “get up to speed,” “move on.” Breathless and agitated, we are propelled by externally imposed rhythms that are often out of sync with those that direct the flow of our internal register. The airy expanse of imagination arrests the motion of an ever-propulsive world, permitting a descent into slowness and deliberation. As we tune in, we turn toward: allowing stillness to orchestrate a more refined response to stimuli and a wider berth of vision. Senses awakened, sharpened, and reinvigorated, we alight on a broader arc of possibility, a blurrier sense of reality.

¹ Henry James, “The Art of Fiction”

The imagination migrates freely between the layers and veils of truth and fiction. Disavowing allegiances, it crosses borders to reveal and produce meaningful connections, undetected, unacknowledged, or concealed. Through acts of subversion, transformation, and transference, its manifestations expose the tenuousness of our apprehension and the gravity of our confrontation with reality. Forcing a reckoning at every turn, countering our acts of denial or declination. In Tim O'Brien's "Good Form," a vignette from his collection *The Things They Carried*, the narrator recounts:

Here is happening-truth. I was once a soldier. There were many bodies, real bodies with real faces, but I was young then and I was afraid to look ...

Here is the story-truth. He was a slim, dead, almost dainty young man of about twenty. He lay in the center of a red clay trail near the village of My Khe. His jaw was in his throat. His one eye was shut, the other eye was a star-shaped hole. I killed him.

Reality, "what really happened," is overshadowed, literally reconfigured and reconceived by the act of revision and revelation. Whereas the narrator had previously neither regarded nor individuated the bodies, their figures must now be exposed, their singularity confirmed. In the timeless realm of story, the past can be recast to suit the desires and demands of the present.

Story-truths parallel imagination's panoramic vistas and possibilities; they are its externalized counterpart. The narrator's encounter with the harrowing contours of his past is framed by a blatant and brazen act of fictionalization. And yet, *it is also true*. We see the dead body and disfigured face; and in turn, we recognize the senselessness, the brutality, the twinned opacity and transparency of war, life, and death. The fragility and totality of life cradled by narrative's sinewy and shimmering frame. Story. Truth. Story-truth.

Quite paradoxically and yet deftly, writers can make something *more* real, *more* true, and certainly more potent when they mine the emotional resonance of language and experience, permitting the imagination to shape and at times radically alter direct experience. In granting the reader entry to the world as it is *felt* rather than merely as it *appears*, the

writer's imagination is collectivized, serving as an analog for experience and expression at the crossroads of individuality and humanity. At the chapter's conclusion, the narrator's daughter asks, "Daddy, tell the truth, did you ever kill anybody?" Her father responds, twice: "And I can say honestly, 'Of course not.' Or I can say, honestly, 'Yes.'" The fact is that the *facts* don't matter: the answer is both "yes" and "no." And that indeterminacy, that unflinching resistance to concede to a singular response, marks the subversive force of the imaginative act.

We all possess literal and figurative blind spots. At the physical level, we cannot even see our own behind: the back half of this figure we claim as *our* body and in which we navigate physical space. When we drive, "the blind spot" complicates and compromises our sense of orientation and certitude. In turn, our interpretive and emotional blind spots preclude us from accessing entire regions of experience and possibility. Perhaps the imagination is the only space we can achieve this sweeping vision? Emancipated from the constraints of the sensory world, corporeality, and temporality, we can enter locked doors, uncover portals to lost realms, and conjure new forms of expression. O'Brien's narrator unifies imagination and reality to cast off blindness for insight and redemption. As readers, we are rewarded with a "better story." But it is far more than that: we have realized and participated in the felt experience of personhood in all its wrenching complexity and ferocity.

Every story, every utterance, has an author, a voice, a perspective, a vital and unmistakable dose of human subjectivity and frailty. This singularity produces the effect of felt experience, engages the imagination, and binds us to one another. Collectively, our story-truths orient us in multiple directions: helping us to make sense of who we are, where we are, where we've come from, and where we are going. We need to believe in stories, and we need imagination to tell and to heed them.

As we reckon with the blurred and yet indelible lines between reality and fiction, we also grapple with the invocation of knowledge claims: with how "truth" can be enlisted to conceal or deny our partiality. What is the conduit between our interior stores of knowledge and the social obligations, the shared language, that draws us into relation with others? Though reality may mediate and even mute our imaginations, it too exacts a reckoning and

responsibility. Virginia Woolf evokes the connective tissue between these two realms: “She was not thinking; she was not reasoning; she was not constructing a plot; she was letting her imagination down into the depths of her consciousness while she sat above holding on by a thin but quite necessary thread of reason.”² The thread so tenuous, so diaphanous: its faintness representing the imposition, the imprint, of human consciousness. The fibers of language, the work of composition, materialize this connection: the fertile tether between the imaginary and the real.

In our imaginations, we occupy both nucleus and margin. Our centrality is at once confirmed by our presiding consciousness and challenged by the scores of other strivings, other souls, singing out to us in turn. When radicalized, the imagination operates unbounded by time and space, in the speculative space of the “what if...then.” Nimble, restless, evocative, it defies borders to seek and unify causes, voices, and ideas that generate a resonance. It gathers strength in its reluctance and refusal to concede to the constraints of contemporary reality and in its reach for potentialities yet to be discovered and born. An agent of visualization and transformation, this dynamic force turns ever outward, communing, conspiring, collaborating. The most powerful social movements have mobilized imagination to illuminate new alignments and communities: to verify and actualize the “what if” and to enact the art of the possible. Harnessing political will to these courageous acts has reshaped our world. Indeed, the radical imagination has been absolutely vital, in the most concrete sense of the word: “*that force that has kept Black folks not only alive physically, but able to dream of new and better worlds while their bodies dwelled in hell...[and] the fortitude to pull those better worlds out of the ether and painstakingly build them into our lived realities.*”³ We live in richer, more inclusive realities because of these radical dreamers and shape shifters, these word and world builders.

² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

³ Walidah Imarisha, “Black Art Matters: A Roundtable on the Black Radical Imagination”

INTERREGNUM:

And then the fires came...

Eviscerating paradise, skewering Malibu, scorching earth, sullyng air: Ablaze as I write. The fires this time. Alternatives arise from ashes. Rummaging through ruins, people come together and forge onward. These moments of crisis disturb and disrupt, challenging our capacity to comprehend our reality, causing us to question its shared parameters. How can we envision a common humanity when we are not even breathing the same air? The imagination is confronted with a border it has neither conceived of nor crossed. The legacy of such a profound disaster rattles both our interpretive and imaginative horizons, individually and collectively. Our contemporary arc of possibility includes the specter of earthly collapse, species annihilation, and nuclear disaster. Imagination pierced by the aggressive and transgressive force of reality. We revise and recalibrate. We are stranded at the threshold of the imaginative frontier.

PART II: INCANTATION

*“One does not discover new lands without consenting to lose sight
of the shore for a very long time” - Andre Gide*

“Wonder is the beginning of wisdom.” - Socrates

Our educational climate reflects the shifting currents of political, technological, and economic change. The recent emergence of STEM-focused curriculum has exerted broad influence on pedagogical orientation and student assessment. Process-oriented and focused on “problem-solving,” it asks students to devise solutions to complex issues. As a writing teacher, I often feel like STEM’s advocates are both replicating and reducing the work that my colleagues and I have been performing for decades. The disciplines collectively known as the humanities have always offered a space to articulate problems, elucidate connections, synthesize experiences, and visualize solutions. But we rarely seek or alight upon a singular answer. After all, there is not just one response to a given literary text, writing prompt, or challenging moral dilemma. I invite students to consider and experiment with different

angles and frameworks for understanding the world and their situation within it. As an advocate for the importance of multiple perspectives and heterogeneous knowledge platforms, I implore students to remain open to challenging and revising their instinctual and habitual frames of reference. To illuminate and vivify the complex emotional and historical terrain of “other” people and places, students’ interpretive portals are expanded, filtered, and chiseled continuously through class discussion, reading assignments, and writing in first, second, and third person voices. The writing projects, ranging from speculative musings to critical exegeses, offer a space for students’ imaginations to spill onto the page, without fear of censure or censorship. As they mold thoughts in/to language, they are composing a verse in the universal chorus, literally carving out their unique notch across the broad expanse of history and humanity.

My curiosity about the ways we apprehend and express our world serves as an opening to my students. Though this receptivity might seem banal as phrased, it is absolutely central to the creative act: a regard for the world with wonder, with genuine interest in its workings and attention to its complexities. It is also the sustaining breath and labor of restoring the imagination and building community. The most gratifying moments of my career emerge when I witness my students develop a more empathetic lens and inclusive framework for navigating the intersection of story, truth, and story-truth. This acquisition stimulates a dual sense of agency and decenteredness, as students bask in the glow of their irreducible singularity *and* inherent partiality. This awakening to *what is and what if* constitutes pedagogy’s individually and socially transformative dimensions. Words break down walls, rendering us residents and migrants alike.

The version of radical inclusivity I espouse is more than a new way of reading the wor(l)d. It is a profoundly ethical orientation: an approach to being an individual in society. My students spend a great deal of time learning about and immersed in the craft of revision, a process as important as the initial act of composition. They write, rewrite, repeat: sounding out the words, engaging the breath, testing the boundaries of language, exerting pressure on and exploding them to register the truths of their experiences and the reach of their

imaginations. As they do this, I guide them toward a parallel practice of critical detachment, to play with approaching their words from a remove: to open up to their strangeness as much as to their resonance. This gap permits students to perform editorial interventions that often paradoxically amplify the uniqueness of their expression. The creative work of re-vision is inherently tied to a stretching and strengthening of the ethical imagination. Students learn that the distance between their perspective and those of others can often be bridged by linguistic and nonlinguistic methods, and that the reward for these efforts is often transcendent.

All knowledge is socially constructed and mediated. A healthy information ecosystem requires a tolerance of and interplay between diversity and dissent. This generative tension fosters new ways of seeing the world and envisioning alternatives. Siva Vaidhyanathan asserts that “Learning is by definition an encounter with what you don’t know, what you haven’t thought of, what you couldn’t conceive, and what you never understood or entertained as possible. It’s an encounter with what’s other—even with otherness as such.”⁴ Education is an engagement with borders: with the radical edges of imagination. The practice of reflection, one both intuitive and learned, is sharpened by the moments when we are confronted with newness, with what is foreign, and when our prejudices, errors, and inconsistencies are revealed to us. We are stranded on shaky interpretive ground, rattled by what our imaginations have not yet fathomed. In the contemporary information climate and political landscape, being able to negotiate and revise knowledge claims is a valuable and critical skill. It demands an intrepid journey toward the frontiers of the imaginary and the real.

The contours of the radicalized imagination are not governed by or tied to theorems, universal laws, or standards. They manifest the widest of horizons, enacting the revelation and drama of human potential. The humanities give students the language to conceptualize and, literally, rewrite their worlds. *For our words matter*. Profoundly. They *are* matter. They form and frame our world and shape how we understand ourselves and treat others. I encourage students to take creative and interpretive risks, to think big and go deep, to push

⁴ Siva Vaidhyanathan, *The Googlization of Everything*

hard at the limits of what they know and what they think they know. To force reality to bear the weight of their imaginations. If they do not, how do they know, how do *we* know what they can do and what can be done? As the inimitable James Baldwin demanded of Black Americans, “You have to impose...you have to decide who you are, and force the world to deal with you, not with its idea of you.” This exertion is a revolutionary act, both reflexive and reflective. It is a declaration of triumph and resurrection: the acme of imaginative achievement.

PART III: RESURRECTION

“Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations...By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him.”

- Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

“Maybe the mightiest word is love.” - Elizabeth Alexander

Our social fragmentation represents a failure of imagination. People cling to their scraps of truth as if a lifeboat, to their shards of the real as if a crystal, not yet convinced of imagination’s power to unify and transform. What a revelation, what a miracle, to learn about something new or to learn about something old in a new way: the feat of defamiliarization. To be able to shed our habitual orientation to gain new vistas, to cross and collapse borders to reclaim the province of imagination. Facts carry us toward the light of justice only if they serve as a portal to the actualization of new possibilities, if they coalesce to ignite the power of story: to unify disparate ideas, to frame a narrative that coheres, that binds, that unifies. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns us, the problem with a “single story” is not that it is untrue, but that it is incomplete.⁵ This, then, this greater sense of

⁵ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story”

fullness and agency, the radicalized ethical imagination, is what I aspire to share with my students.

Against a landscape of loss and erasure, our imaginations remember and reassemble: embracing in equal measure the could, should, and would have beens, seeking second chances alongside new beginnings. In an era of historical amnesia, of willed forgetting, we balance its conjurings with the long arc of history. We examine these fissures to read between the lines, to mine the gaps of our historical record, and to uncover the labor, the treads and the traces, of all the radical dreamers who have preceded us, who have reshaped the boundaries of our collective imagination.

The whole sky is yours

to write on, blown open

to a blank page

~ an excerpt from "Dawn Revisited" by Rita Dove

The elliptical space between the stanzas represents the imagination itself. Ellipses are the antitheses to borders. Borders demarcate: specify and circumscribe. This is *here* and that is *there*. Ellipses open up, invite anticipatory speculation. They restore a world beyond and before geographical classification and imperial partition, a world made whole again. They return us to the land of "what if," the realm of childhood wonder and flow. Pulling at the seams of our frayed collective, imagination welcomes all into its billowing and luminous glow.

This elliptical space is where you enter. Find your perch and stand ready to fly freely through the broadest of horizons illumined within this new and revolutionary space. Seek out others to fly alongside you, inspire them by the sheer power, the sheer *fact*, of your flight.

Be visible so that they can find you: glorious and radiant, propelled by a fierceness that emanates from the deepest, most infinite parts of your being.

We are unmoored in a vast sea of possibilities—

incalculable depths

unfathomable horizons.

Dreamers,

searching for the safety of shore

Drifters,

edging toward borders unknown.

Shape shifters

All of us—

hoping

not to drown.

All of us hoping not to drown.

We turn to others in sympathy and declare, “I can only *imagine* what that must be like for you.” But why do we use the word “*only*” and in so doing diminish the value and significance of this revolutionary and innate force? Why not marshal linguistic precision in the service of communion? Imagination is not the *only* thing; it is *everything*. It is where we enter the world. It is when we begin to form the word. It is how we find *us*.

So go ahead, students, humans, denizens, creators, and inhabitants of a world yet to be made: be the dreamer and the dream. Embrace the ellipsis. Dare to make your mark.

Write wildly, write feverishly, write with all the love and courage and spirit and audacity and generosity you can summon. Then reach for more.