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Corine Labridy-Stofle
Reed College

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UPROOTED RHIZOMES: COLLABORATING IN TIMES OF TROUBLING TRANSITIONS

Corine Labridy-Stofle, Visiting Associate Professor of French, Reed College

In her conceptualization of “troubling transitions,” Karen Gravett invited us to think about students’ experiences in higher education as rhizomatic rather than linear. Before I return to the importance of re-envisioning student trajectories in this more intuitive, less prescriptive manner, I would like to briefly reflect on the fact that faculty, too, experience many transitions throughout their careers. While we hope that the toll of these transitions remains largely invisible to our students, it is during such times that student-faculty partnerships can tell us the most about our teaching. There are a few tender transitions in the faculty career: the first year; the year(s) leading up to tenure; the year we realize how behind we are on new popular trends (What is TikTok? No really, what is it?); the year we realize that our own learning experience has so little to do with our students’ that we may as well have attended school on different planets (this is obviously a stretch, but still); etc. These tender times can be made extra tender by external circumstances: births, deaths, illness, aging parents, social pressures related to race, gender, etc. I absolutely do not suggest that we burden our student-partners with such private details; rather, I propose that we strategically chose those more complex times to enter in collaborative partnerships to better understand how we show up in the classroom when we feel vulnerable or in transition. Furthermore, once we can admit to ourselves that our own experiences necessarily contain their own unique bifurcations, we can extend this compassionate understanding to our students, to our colleagues (including lecturers and adjuncts, of course), and to those who make our job possible (staff and administrators). To be sure, replacing the idea of “being” with the concept of “becoming” requires, at first, that we devote quite a bit of energy to reevaluating some of our practices. Still, this work can only add value to our institutions and most importantly, to the quality of our students’ experiences.

To be candid, I chose precisely a time of professional and personal transition to begin collaborative work with a student-partner, Parker Matias, who is also a contributor to this issue. The past academic year marked my transition from an experienced graduate student instructor to a new visiting associate professor. As an instructor, one way that I had always created community in my classes was to emphasize that “we are all students here.” This nifty device never failed to put undergraduate students at ease and make them feel comfortable asking questions or trying out new ideas. With my new job title, it felt cliché to say, “we are all students here” (even though that will forever be true). In addition, after a successful but relatively safe first semester, I wanted to attempt a course that required next-level sensitivity to class dynamics, as its topic was particularly delicate: Black Women in Francophone Literatures. The course proposed to investigate how early images and conceptions of the Black femme body before, during, and immediately after the slavery era continue to haunt contemporary narratives authored by Black female writers from the Caribbean, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Metropolitan France. This meant confronting diverse forms of violence, including objectification, sexualization, and racialization. It is probably useful, at this point, to tell my reader that I am a mixed-race Black French-Caribbean woman — therefore, the course’s content constituted at once an area of expertise and a deeply personal interest. I should also add that the class was taught entirely in French to a mix of grades (from first-years to seniors), linguistic proficiencies (some were extremely comfortable speaking, others were more at ease writing), races, and genders. My

concerns included: how can we collectively make sure that we avoid discursive pitfalls that reproduce racial and gender violence rather than deconstruct it (again, all in French)? How can I simultaneously center the experience of Black students (for whom such a course is long-awaited) and create a space where non-Black and/or non-femme students can learn and contribute all the while negotiating the complexities of their inherent privilege? In short, how can we collectively build a safe learning space when discussing sensitive topics? I am beyond grateful that Parker was willing to take on this collaboration. As you can imagine, students who can both do this type of work *and* speak French are scarce. With Parker graduating at the end of the semester, I understood this partnership was a rare opportunity. Parker had been a student in my class the previous semester, but the change from student to student-partner posed no problem thanks to his professionalism and to the fact that I recognized that I was at a moment in my career in which I could greatly benefit from informed feedback.

Together, Parker and I prioritized community-building, looking for strategies that delved deeper than simply making students comfortable, but rather, tended toward creating comfort in discomfort. The first few weeks of the semester were dedicated to giving space to students to reflect on what brought them to this class, and what individual backgrounds they, in turn, brought to it. I asked my group to speak — as little or as much as they wished — about their origins, and how these intersected (or not) with Blackness in the United States or elsewhere. I also asked them simply why they had chosen this class. Responses ranged from Black ancestry to Southern backgrounds with fraught exposure to Black culture via “I am taking this class because it fits in my schedule,” which is actually a very acceptable answer in terms of honesty. The students’ candor was surprising and refreshing. To gauge the effectiveness of this strategy, Parker went on to subsequently map out participation patterns, paying close attention to how students interacted with me and each other. We noted that, for the most part, students quickly felt at ease dialoguing with one another in this conference-style classroom, and that participation was evolving well. Parker helped me assess the success of certain activities, shared creative ways to continue nurturing participation, and provided insight into how to determine the correct balance of lecture to activities and interpret clues that signal the need to re-adjust this balance mid-session. It seemed the class was on a soft path to my idea of success: students were not just learning about the historical constructedness of the Black female image in a Franco-European context, but also how to apply sensible discursive strategies around the intersection of race and gender in a global context. As we neared the semester’s halfway point, Parker and I dedicated one of our regular feedback meetings to discussing how to effectively survey students’ experience thus far to see if it was in line with our observations. A couple of days later, students were asked to vacate the dorms, and faculty were told that teaching would resume online after Spring Break.

In a strange way, the goals Parker and I had set for the course did not change dramatically. The objective was always to design a safe and productive learning space, and it remained so. But everything else was different, and this transition brought new sets of questions: How do I show up when my personal and professional spheres overlap in an unprecedented manner? Can my students tell that, ten minutes before class, I was in the hilarious predicament of clumsily explaining to my *de facto* homeschooled fifth-grader how to divide fractions? Is there a Zoom filter strong enough to conceal my exhaustion? How does my status as a parent make my experience different from my colleagues’? From understanding not only that my situation

presented unique challenges, but also that myriad other aspects made my colleagues' situations just as unique, I began to imagine what factors affected my students' learning and how I could adapt my teaching to these new sets of coordinates. I could not have been more grateful to have access to Parker's thoughts during that time, in no small part because, early on in the pandemic, he had begun providing content for the Reed College Center for Teaching and Learning's blog dedicated to best practices in online teaching and had researched the topic extensively. We discussed what made this switch to remote instruction so exhausting (while I only taught three classes that semester, Parker pointed out that some students spent several hours per day in Zoom meetings), how to adapt course length and activities to this new format, how and when to build in breaks, and how to spot signs that we had reached the limit of effectiveness of synchronous learning for that day and that the rest of a session's goals would be best achieved if completed asynchronously. All of these pieces of insight were easily applied to my two other courses for the semester, which were language-acquisition courses.

Considering the totality of my students last spring, the move to remote learning made visible realities they were always already contending with, although there had not been an occasion to bring them to light up until then. Some students always had loving homes to go back to; others had known all along that they didn't — for some, this was heartbreaking, and for others, it was liberating. Among those who did have family homes to return to, those homes proved to be either great for continuing college work, or, under these new circumstances, not conducive to productivity, for reasons that ranged from sharing space with a younger sibling to having parents on the frontline of the pandemic. Some of my international students went back home and joined in from as far as Austria; others would have liked to but couldn't because of travel restrictions. The rhizomatic nature of each experience was made all the more manifest when it became evident that seemingly optimal living situations did not always equate to thriving in a virtual classroom environment. This grid yielded not necessarily foreseeable behaviors. For some students, the quality of work never faltered. They continued having impeccable attendance, working at their typical 200% capacity, even asking for additional work. Others continued to show up and work hard but were visibly exhausted. Some students actually improved. Others confided that they missed the in-person camaraderie so much that they simply could not handle the virtual setting, even though I had tried hard to reproduce our habitual spontaneity. For those students, I created additional asynchronous assignments and proposed regular check-ins via journaling. Others yet did not improve but continued to show up. I measured their success in terms of grit rather than mastery of particular grammar points. On the last day, a few students confided that they were grateful I had not done away with daily meetings because it was the only time they could connect with their peers. Thinking specifically about my literature course, the strong foundation we had established prior to the pandemic made the shift to remote learning almost seamless. I can honestly say that no one gave up. When we return to in-person teaching (one day), I will keep with me this new understanding of my students. How I can continue to make room for their multiplicity in a face-to-face setting and to think in terms of "becoming" rather than "being" is something I will keep striving for. In truth, however, as a Caribbean-born person, I already carried notions of multiplicity, intersectionality, and the rhizome within me, but I am more determined than ever to infuse them more consistently in my teaching.

As the end of the semester neared, we collectively began mourning the fact that we would not be together for all the traditional spring festivities. I have yet to witness the quintessential and

legendary Reed College experience that is Renn Fayre (those who know, know, but I still don't). Above all, I didn't get to see my first sets of seniors walk across the stage for graduation. This short-circuited togetherness was already hard to grapple with, but it became all the more significant in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, which occurred after the semester ended. With this new crisis, superimposed onto another crisis, I began to think of the ways that the physical presence of particular bodies on campus is a political act of resistance against the status quo. For my students of color, my first-generation students, my queer and trans students, existing at an elite institution is a powerful gesture of self-affirmation. Even though I hope they continued to feel seen, I grieved that their belonging to the campus community was, to some extent, temporarily reduced to a series of zeros and ones traveling on Wi-Fi waves. While my literature conference students had been immersed in discussions about race, intersectionality, and historical privilege all semester — discussions that are currently flooding the nation's discursive landscape — I wonder how to include such ideas in my language courses as well. But instead of ideas being imposed, I am thinking in terms of critical processes being collaboratively scaffolded. My partnership with Parker made me realize the possibility of such collaborations becoming the norm, rather than isolated experiments, and how they could be deployed in the as-yet-incomplete project of social justice.

Nightmarish, dystopian are terms that have been recently used to describe our times. I would like to conclude by saying that these times have left me dreaming of utopia; not of a linear, singular, or teleological utopia — we know better now — but rather of an expansive network of utopias, embracing their own and others' constant states of becoming.