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“Even Your Failures Can Be Fabulous”

Reflections on Stories, Movement, and Aging

ABSTRACT This brief essay presents a collage of moments, snippets of stories, both personal and popular, that relate to metamorphosis and the migration of stories across a(n) (academic) lifetime. **KEYWORDS** Metamorphosis; Narrative; Aging; Popular culture

I present a collage of moments, snippets of stories, both personal and popular, that relate to metamorphosis and the migration of stories across a(n) (academic) lifetime. Devika Chawla says it best; “This is a train of thought or performance or something ordinary that looks and feels like something. It is a collection of pieced-together memories that lay bare the contours of the everyday, mundane, and ordinary affect.”¹ She examines a smile, I embody the depressive position.

“Thresholds always seem to be in between one thing and another, between outside and inside, a line to be crossed, a point beyond which something—pain, patience, learning, life—changes.”²

“Nepantlas are places of constant tension, where the missing or absent pieces can be summoned back, where transformation and healing may be possible, where wholeness is just out of reach but seems attainable.”³

“To be healed we must be dismembered, pulled apart.”⁴

“So, I begin where my body remembers, and I go where it takes me.”⁵

In the 2017 sequel to 1996’s *Trainspotting*, *T2: Trainspotting*, Mark Renton, portrayed by Ewan McGregor, reflects on the infamous “choose life” monologue from the first film. Twenty-plus years after the events of the first film, gen-Xer Renton revisits choose life as a way of taking stock of his life and the process of aging. Melancholy, regret, and humor punctuate his new choose life monologue as he shares:

Choose unfulfilled promise and wishing you’d done it all differently.

Choose never learning from your own mistakes. Choose watching history

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repeat itself. Choose the slow reconciliation towards what you can get, rather than what you always hoped for. Settle for less and keep a brave face on it. Choose disappointment.⁶

Watching this film, I too was drawn into the sense of melancholy and reflection about the process of aging, change, and metamorphosis. In 1999, in the shared office I occupied while I was a master's student at Arizona State University, my contribution to the office was a poster of a sweaty, heroin addicted Renton from *Trainspotting*. I had just begun to think about the possibility of making academia a career choice. Like Renton, some twenty-plus years later, this gen-Xer reflects on the passage of time and the choices made. Hauntingly, the late George Michael, wearing his "choose life" shirt, dances in my head. Likewise, twenty-five years later, Agent Dale Cooper returns on the scene, but he's not quite the same.⁷ Trapped in the Black Lodge for so long he doesn't really know what's happening anymore and he's lost his voice. Instead, we're left with the anger and villainy of his doppelganger, Mr. C. The ghosts of yesteryear return all at once. Did they ever really leave?

"This is not revisionary history or metahistory, it is a critical deployment of the past for the purpose of engaging the present and imaging the future."⁸

"Even your failures can be fabulous." These words come to me after I share the sense of failure, doubt, and uncertainty I experience daily. The feeling of being out of place. Dressed in my leopard-print coat, and an outfit that certainly doesn't befit the academic occasion, my class inadequacies reach the surface. He comes as a much needed and too infrequent Latino voice in the South. A momentary feeling of kinship, "collective, communal, and consensual affiliations as well as the psychic, affective, and visceral bonds," prevail.⁹ At my lowest point, his words save me as I grieve the loss of Tata—my grandfather, the only father I have ever known—during the first year of my doctoral degree. I'm trying to decide whether I should stay or go. His words become one of the greatest gifts I have ever received. Puerto Rican poet, my queer saint, and in this fleeting moment of connection, my guardian angel—Rane Arroyo, you were gone too soon. My copy of *The Singing Shark*¹⁰ reads: "Bernadette—like the song of the 4 Tops only in one lovely spotlight. Rane Arroyo, March 26, 2001." His words carry me from a doctoral program to a full professorship, until I become what Gloria Holguín Cuádriz calls a "*La Llorona* with a PhD; birthing ideas rather than children."¹¹ Changing shape between *La Llorona* and *La Malinche*, they

become my mantra, a source of strength and possibility redeeming all the things that could easily take me down. Like Sara Ahmed, I believe

Hope is not at the expense of struggle but animates a struggle; hope gives us a sense that there is a point to working things out, working things through. Hope does not only or always point toward the future, but carries us through when the terrain is difficult, when the path we follow makes it harder to proceed.¹²

These words sing in concert with the chords of my generation. X marks the spot. Gen X. Latinx.

I've convinced myself to stay and I'm looking for home in a completely new place. I find it in the space between two bodies.¹³ Elias Miguel Muñoz's words capture the moment:

Look at this picture. See that cute guy there, in the back, behind Maritza? He's the one. My buddy. In my childhood story you have become that kid, Marito. Or rather, he has become you. And I can no longer remember his real name.¹⁴

My Marito is now gone. Not every story ends in a fairytale. But even after he leaves, my desire remains. Home becomes a utopia and "utopianism represents a failure to be normal."¹⁵ One of my queer angels reminds me that "queer fantasy is linked to utopian longing, and together the two can become contributing conditions of possibility for political transformation."¹⁶ My desire has always been queer.

Exchanging pleasantries,
 Signaling possibilities.
I turn away as I feel the red flush my cheeks.
Does she feel it too?
I hesitate to look back.

Roland Barthes reminds me, "I encounter millions of bodies in my life; of these millions, I may desire some hundreds; but of these hundreds, I love only one."¹⁷

I am no Mark Renton or Troy Dyer whose *Reality Bites*.¹⁸ My queer Chicana failures don't end in witty references to obscure indie albums or novels written by angsty white boys.

She asked why Cherrie Moraga references *Casablanca*, a heteronormative classic, in describing her queer love story.¹⁹ I answer, "What other models are

there to reference in such a heteronormative society? Where are our queer models of love? Especially for queer women of color?” Likewise, I reflect on my models of aging and change, especially as a queer Chicana who chooses to be childfree.

In winter 2017, I watch Yoda tell Luke Skywalker that the only way the Jedi can continue on is to lose the constraints and canons of the past.²⁰ Luke is no longer eager, fresh-faced, and earnest; instead, he has become an old curmudgeon who has lost faith in the Force. Eventually, he brushes the dirt off his shoulder, an act of resistance against his haters. In the era of #metoo, the Jedi will be brought into the future by a young white woman. Likewise, a young Princess Leia becomes the symbol of the revolution, reminding us that a woman’s place is in the resistance. However, it is bittersweet, as Carrie Fisher is no longer here. Just like Armond needed Louis in *Interview with the Vampire*²¹ to bring him into the future, so do the Jedi need Rey, only this story doesn’t have a queer twist. Yoda tells Luke, “We are what they grow beyond. That is the true burden of all masters.”²² Narratives must shift and so must idols.

Looking for inspiration, I come across my original copy of *Disidentifications*, the book that would launch my academic trajectory and push me to move across the country to pursue a PhD in performance studies.²³ Dated 9 March 2000, the inscription reads, “Para Bernadette, I hope this work helps make your work possible—because its [sic] much needed. Warmly, José.” Elsewhere I’ve told the story of this meeting and how he looked like family, both literally and queerly.²⁴ A brief moment permanently etched into my heart.

Like Gloria Anzaldúa, Rane Arroyo, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Michele Serros, and Luis Leon, José Esteban Muñoz was gone too soon. All my queer Latina/o/x guardian angels, whose words and stories remain to animate my spirit and guide me forward, they become integrated into my core. In these dark moments, not only of loss, but in the consistent presence of vile, hate-filled words, hurled at Black and Brown people, these muses sustain me. They help me find ways to make my failures fabulous. Even now. And they are needed more than ever before. ■

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