

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Poetry

## If I Were Not Afraid and It Was Snowing: A Choral Birth Poem

by Jessica Ann Vooris

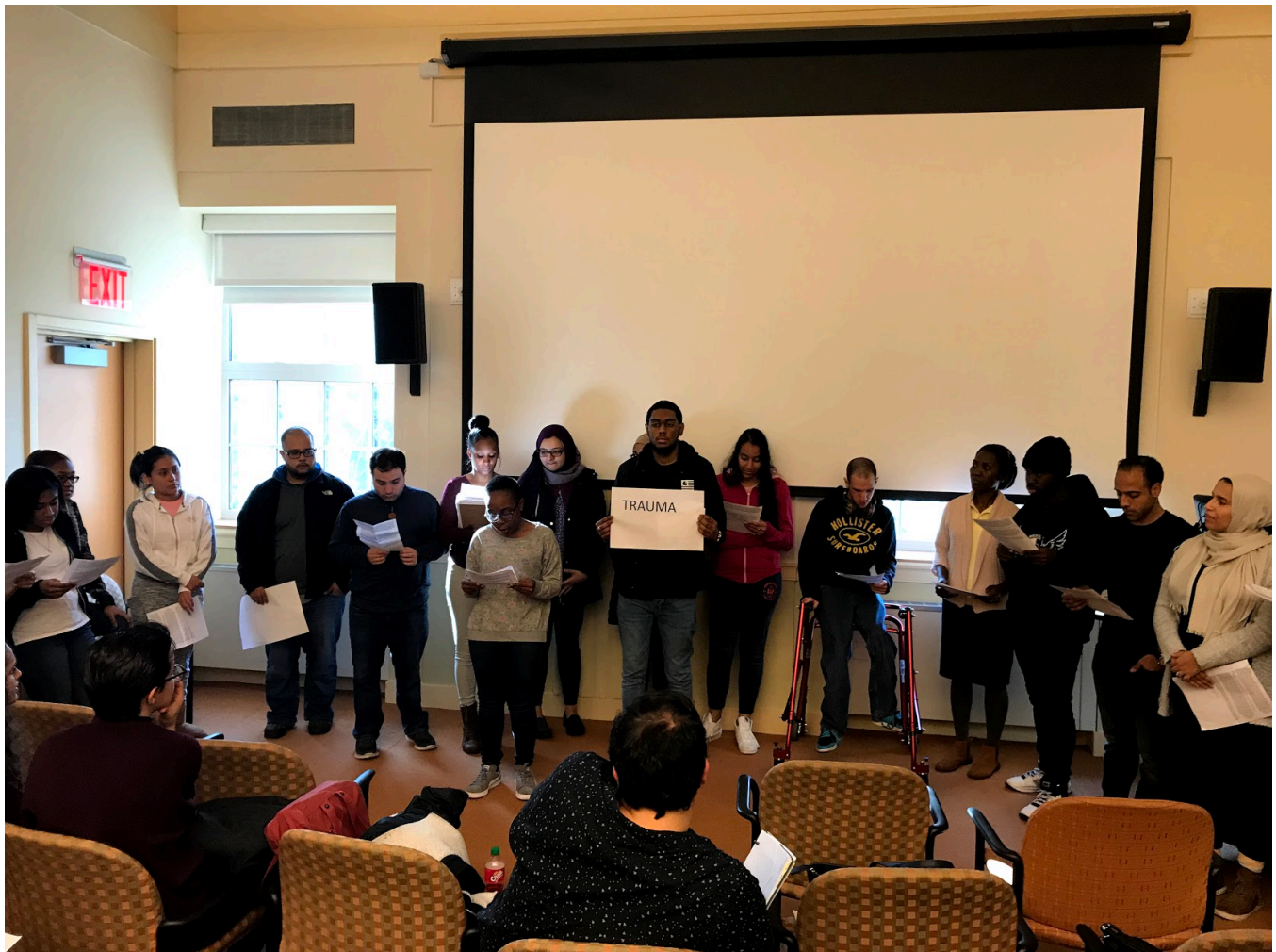


IMAGE COURTESY OF JOSEPH ENTIN

In my *International Women's Perspectives* course at Towson University I began every class with a prompt or question that students answered on an index card that I collected. Sometimes this was a content question based on the reading, sometimes it was a prompt to draw a self-portrait (based on Lynda Barry's pedagogical practice of self-portraits), and sometimes it was an open question about the subject that we would be discussing. This exercise functioned as a way to keep attendance, and to get a sense of how they were engaging with class material. It was also fun to see their self-portraits and the moment of sketching together (I drew on the board too whenever the prompt was for a self-portrait) helped ground us in the classroom together.

Although I had not intended to create poetry from these exercises, I found students' responses to some of the questions to be poignant, powerful, and lyrical, and I felt that they would fit well into a poem format. Thus began my unexpected creative collaboration with my students, springing from a daily attendance exercise. The poems that were created from student work reflect some of the key themes discussed in the course, which was one of Towson's Introduction to Women's Studies courses, and they have made me think more deeply about the ways that my students and I might engage with class material and with the act of writing together.

To create the poems, I combined the responses to the attendance prompt from both sections of my class—70 students in total. I then edited, re-arranged, and curated the pieces into poems. I purposely combined both of my course sections together so that it would be harder to connect any particular stanza to a student in the class, thus giving a sense of anonymity. And this also gave me a wider variety of material to work with.

Although students did not know ahead of time that I would do this, when I presented the finished poems to the class, students were all given the opportunity to remove their section if they didn't want it included. I also asked for and was granted permission by all of my students to share the poems publicly. Together, we read the poems out-loud in a chorus—I projected the poem up on the projector screen, and then we went around the room, each of them reading a stanza or a few lines. Students were excited about the "It Was Snowing" poem, and seemed to enjoy it when I produced a second poem from their words as well.

The poem "It was Snowing" came from the week that we studied birth practices and reproductive justice. Students had read "The Medicalization of Birth and Midwifery as Resistance" (JC Shaw, 2013), and the index card question was "What do you know about your birth?" Their responses captured a lot of the themes we discussed in class that week related to reproductive justice, especially in regard to birth experiences in the US and the stories about birth that are part of the public imagination. I was struck by how much information was contained in just a few lines or words, and the vivid nature of their stories, and it was these index cards

that prompted my first attempt at creating a poem from their responses.

The poem is a mosaic of the different pieces of birth--time, birth weight, length of labor, expectations of the doctors or nurses, medical details, fears that mother or child might not survive, the medicalization of women's bodies. Two students wrote that it was snowing when they were born--two lines that worked well to open and close the poem. I arranged the poem by combining similar information like dates, weight at birth, reasons for induction, the process of labor itself, reactions after they were born. I focused on strong images, as well as narrative flow.

The second poem "If I Were Not Afraid" was written during our violence against women unit where we talked about street harassment, sexual assault and the ways that women's bodies are policed in public. The index card prompt was, "What would you do if you were not afraid?" Students were told their answers could be related to the class or could be more general. Given the discussions we had been having in class, many of the responses reflect the topic of street harassment and student's fears about moving around in public, but they also reflect larger ideas about societal constraints and ideas about what is a proper life. They describe their dreams of travel, and the ways they would break free of expectations in regards to relationships, careers, school, and their bodies. Three students said they would sky-dive. Again, I was struck by the vivid imagery, the breadth and depth of their answers—from adventurous desires like swimming with sharks, to the wish to feel comfortable enough to walk outside without make-up. For this poem, I included more repetition, and arranged students' answers thematically. This poem, like "It Was Snowing," captures the sexism that shapes our lives and experiences.

My students seemed to enjoy the poems that were created, and several asked for copies to share with others. In the future I hope to do this exercise again, and I have been thinking about how to involve my students more in the process. While I called it a "collaborative" exercise, in this version of the exercise, I was the curator of my students' work/words. It would be great to give students the opportunity to write their own poems, perhaps by collecting all of the index card responses, combining them in a random list, and giving them to students to create poems. It would be fascinating to see all of the different versions of poems that might come from that, and which snippets and images students would choose to highlight. The lesson could also include a discussion of found poetry and erasure poetry, as these are two poem forms that students might use to engage with the index card material.

For folks seeking to conduct a similar exercise in your classes, I would encourage you to pick questions/prompts that are connected to the material and topics of class, but are also broad enough to solicit a variety of responses. I think this is an ideal exercise for a Women's Studies classroom where students are frequently asked to think about the way that the personal is political, and learn about

the importance of poetry, fiction, and narrative in the creation of feminist theory. However, I think that it would also fit well into a variety of other classes, including but not limited to Anthropology, Sociology, English Literature, History, American Studies, and of course creative writing courses as well.

## References

- Barry, Lynda. *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor*. Montréal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2015.
- Shaw, J.C.A. "The Medicalization of Birth and Midwifery As Resistance." *Health Care for Women International*. 34.6 (2013): 522-536.

## It was Snowing: A Choral Birth Poem

It was snowing that night.  
My aunt drove my mom to the hospital.

I was born in June;  
Ash Wednesday;  
October 30th  
and my brother visited me  
in his costume and got candy from the nurses.

I believe I was born at night.

I was born in a hospital around 4 am. #gemini  
On a Wednesday, in the afternoon, around 3 pm, I believe.  
December 21st, there was a blizzard.  
Monday morning at 7 am.  
El Salvador, at the military hospital.

I don't know much  
except the same doctor delivered me and my 3 siblings,  
except I was 6 lbs and 7 ounces,  
except I was feet first and needed to be flipped.

Dad was a mess.

I was 5 lbs and my mom didn't have time for an epidural.  
It was the day before Mother's Day.

Things I know about my birth:  
I took a long time to come,  
my mom was in a lot of pain.  
I was born between two miscarriages.

All I know is I was born at 4:37 pm,  
or maybe it was 3:47 pm.

I was a surprise baby, she thought I was the flu.

I was 10 lbs,  
I was 7 lbs 11 ounces,  
I was 7 lbs 5 oz.  
I was 6 lbs even.

My mother had gestational diabetes.

I tried to come out at 4 months,  
a week early, first-born,  
2 weeks late.

They broke my mother's water.

She was induced because I stopped breathing;  
because my mom had super short labors,  
because she didn't want me born on Christmas,  
because I was getting too big,  
because of high blood pressure,  
because my doctor wanted to leave on vacation.

She was in labor for 17 hours,  
for 36 hours, 8 hours, not for long,  
didn't have time for an epidural,  
didn't know her rights,  
she was young so no one took her seriously.

No medication; a hard labor.  
Too much of the epidural,  
she could barely push me out.  
I wasn't coming, they had to use the vacuum.  
I had the umbilical cord wrapped around my neck.

Emergency C-Section.

The doctors didn't believe her when she told them  
I had stopped moving. If they had waited another hour,  
I wouldn't have been born alive.

I got stuck and turned blue, but I survived.  
First girl in my house after 16 years.  
I was born natural and came very fast.

They think I was supposed to be a twin  
but there was a rip in the placenta,  
the doctors took it away, said "we must study this."

I don't really know how to feel about my birth:  
I'm just here really,  
but my birth was interesting,  
because I was born with a birth defect.

In one of the sonograms of me,  
it looks like I am blowing bubbles.

My mom had 2 epidurals because I refused to be born.

My mom almost died because the nurses forgot  
about the placenta left inside.

My mom was in the middle of eating cheese-cake  
when her water broke and I love cheese-cake.

I came out not crying, but laughing.

I have seen pictures of my own birth:  
I was fat, covered in liquids, and a full head of hair,  
still attached to my mother through the cord.

My grandparents adopted me and the doctors  
tried to take me away from my mom,  
although we lived in the same house.

My dad said I looked like a lizard  
'cause I was purple.

Out of all of my sisters  
I have the lightest complexion.

I was born on October 7th,  
in hospital, a lot of people were in the room.

As soon as I was old enough to ride on a plane,  
we went back home.

I had a lot of hair, I had no hair,  
It was snowing.

## If I Were Not Afraid

If I were not afraid I would  
say how I feel, speak my mind,  
talk more about my opinions,  
tell my story,  
speak back to men in power.

I would be more resilient  
I would not doubt myself,  
I would not be limited,  
I would go out anywhere, anytime,  
I would be more at ease,  
I would take more risks.

I would sky-dive,  
sky-dive,  
sky-dive,  
and swim with sharks.

I would travel the world for a year,  
I would study abroad.  
I would move to Colorado or New Zealand or California,  
move away as soon as I graduate.  
I would buy a ticket to Budapest and never come back.  
Quit school and travel the world,  
travel the world after school.

I am afraid to fail, it keeps me going.

I would do things alone,  
walk alone at night,  
travel by myself,  
make new friends.

I don't know, I have never experienced a lack of fear.

Change my major or not continue college, change my future.  
I would become a politician, be on city council,  
be a game tester, be an artist for a living,  
join the navy, spend 6 months with my family  
in Jamaica every year.

I would try new foods, wear bright colors,  
get married to my fiancé and finish college where he is stationed,  
organize huge movements in places like Pakistan  
and raise awareness about sexual assault.

I would learn to fly an airplane,  
I wouldn't wear make-up every day,  
I would make the first move, be proud  
to wear clothing that makes me feel sexy.

I would go after my dreams,  
have adventures at night.

I would walk away from everything that makes me second guess myself.

I would be bold in my interactions, participate more, be fearless.  
I would not hesitate, I would take more chances,  
be independent.

I would be confident of who I really am,  
and embrace my femininity rather than hiding it.

I wouldn't be a people pleaser,  
I would ask for a raise.  
I would get an industrial piercing,  
wear whatever I want, whenever I want.

I would smile at men,  
I would be more outgoing and make connections,  
I would major in music,  
try to become a musician,  
and ask the girl I'm talking to to be my girlfriend.

I wouldn't carry pepper spray,  
I could walk by myself alone at night,  
I'd leave my apartment more, I wouldn't feel anxious  
and unsafe all the time.

I would be able to walk with my headphones in  
without looking over my shoulder.  
I would enjoy the little things.  
I would travel the world and go on dangerous adventures,  
no worrying about making something of myself  
or about financial troubles.

If I were unafraid, I would have let him go before he had the chance to hurt me.  
If I weren't afraid, I wouldn't mind being lonely.  
If I weren't afraid of certain animals, I would be a vet.  
If I hadn't been afraid, high-school could have been different for me.

If you conquer fear, then you conquer death.  
I used to be afraid of everything,  
now I try to live without fear.  
Not without caution, but without fear.

I would walk to the woods alone at night  
and sit in the beauty of darkness.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://www.library.pitt.edu/) of the [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](https://www.library.pitt.edu/dscribe/), and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](https://www.press.pitt.edu/).