

Rutgers Newark Community Writing Workshop
PaulA Neves, Instructor, The Writing Program
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Thursday, June 22, 2023, 4-6pm, Hahnes Building #250

Theme: Writing Through Trauma – In this interactive workshop, we will look at writing as a means of facing and surviving trauma. We will discuss and apply techniques used to help us write our way through buried and frightening emotions and come out the other side closer to healing and empowerment.

Texts for Discussion (subject to changes and time):

- Excerpt from *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City* by Nick Flynn (prose/hybrid)
- "Mixtape for City Kids from Dysfunctional but Happy Families, Kids Like Me" from *Elegies* by Roberto Carlos Garcia (poem)
- "holy water (the second coming of drought)" by paulA neves (prose poem)
- "Shattered by Childbirth" and "Mami and I..." by Nancy Mendez Booth (essay & social media post)
- Excerpt from *East Meets West* by Andrew Lam (essay)
- Excerpt from *American Indian Stories* by Zitkala-Sa (hybrid)

Schedule (subject to adjustments):

1. Discuss: Different forms trauma writing can take and how they are a means of reflection, activism, testimony, and healing. (15-20 minutes)
2. Read and discuss texts as time permits (15-20 minutes)
3. Write Time 1: give prompt and write (20-30 minutes)
4. 5 minute break
5. Share writings and discuss what's strong/working (20 minutes)
6. Discuss revision strategies (15 minutes)
7. Write/Revision Time 2: (15 minutes; work with individual students as needed)
8. Hand out flyers or announce for upcoming Community Workshops

paulA neves is a Newark, NJ-born poet/writer, multimedia artist, and educator. The recipient of the 2020 NJ Poets Prize from the Journal of NJ Poets, and various other awards, paulA is the author of the poetry chapbook, *capricornucopia: the dream of the goats* (Finishing Line Press 2018), the co-author of the poetry/photography collection, *Shirts & Skins* (Shine Portrait Studio Press 2017) and the co-founder of Parkway North Productions, which produced the award-winning documentary *The Remedy*, about two NJ hip hop artists. paulA's other writing and visual art, which often focus on the immigrant experience, the confluence of urban and natural environments, family and artists communities, have appeared in various publications and exhibits. She teaches at Rutgers and in other community and college programs.

From Another Bullshit Night
in Suck City by Nick Flynn

automatic teller

(1989) *Please*, she whispers, *how may I help you?* The screen lights up with her voice. A room you enter, numbers you finger, heated, sterile almost. The phone beside her never rings, like a toy, like a prop. My father lifts the receiver in the night, speaks into it, asks, *Where's the money?* asks, *Why can't I sleep?* asks, *Who left me outside?* The phone rings on a desk when he lifts it, the desk somewhere in Texas, someone is always supposed to be at that desk but no one ever is, not at night. A machine speaks while my father tries to speak, it doesn't listen, it only speaks, my father's face reflected dimly on the screen.

Any card with a magnetic strip will let you in, all the street guys know this, or learn quick. It's never night inside this room, the lights hum a deafening white. My father stands at the desk, filling out deposit slips—*Five hundred to savings, twenty-five thousand to checking, all cash*—then puts the slips in an envelope and tosses it into the trash. Drive past

and it's like a window display, a diorama—*Late Twentieth Century Man Pretending to Be Banking*—brought to you by the Museum of the Homeless. The people who enter, those with money to withdraw, most of them don't even glance at my father, don't give him a second look. Dressed well, clean, his graying hair long and swept back from his forehead—just like them, doing a little banking after midnight, on his way to an after-hours club, a late dinner, a lady waiting in the car, *that car*, by the curb, the engine running, the heat blowing on her legs while she listens to the radio—*A little honey in my pot, or, Baby it's cold outside*. Skid is curled beneath the desk—semiconscious or out cold, hard to tell, his boombox cranked up full, he holds it tight to his chest like a screaming child. My father hums. The lights hum. The couple at the automatic teller kiss, the machine clicks out a small pile of bills, my father bends to his deposit slip, *Six hundred and seventy thousand, cash*, he puts it in an envelope, licks the envelope shut. The couple stand by the door, still kissing, like they have no place better to be, like this is the most romantic spot in the city.

is a magnetic card. My father another harmless weirdo, unlau Eyed One talks out of the side over my father's shoulder to fears he's being watched, and in he's not? Someone behind that movie of his life.

Alice, hunched by the trash, night and carve their initials in returned palm to Bill accusing scratches on her hand do look this is true. Bill glances at my f glares at Bill. *And which Bill are* *clacks, or the one that snuck in las* My father, finished depositing ceramic floor, turns his face below the window so the fake sheriff stars painted on their below their line of sight it mig

In Boston the bars close at oers, more gregarious than th headed home, push their way

apologist

If you asked me about my father then—the years he lived in a doorway, in a shelter, in an ATM—I'd say, *Dead*, I'd say, *Missing*, I'd say, *I don't know where he is*. I'd say whatever I felt like saying, and it would all be true. I don't know him, I'd say, my mother left him shortly after I was born, or just before. But this story did not hold still for long. It wavered.

Even before he became homeless I'd heard whispers, sensed he was circling close, that we were circling each other, like planets unmoored. I knew he drove a cab, maybe my mother told me that, though she said almost nothing about him, except that it was better he wasn't around. I even knew what kind, a Town Taxi, a black and white. In my early twenties, after I dropped out of college and moved to Boston, I would involuntarily check the driver of each that passed, uncertain what it would mean, what I would do, if it was my father behind the wheel. I

knew he lived in a rooming house on Beacon Hill, I'd heard about it a couple years before they evicted him, before he moved into his cab, leasing it twenty-four hours at a stretch, before he blacked out on a vodka jag, hit *some or something*, before they took his license away. The day he was evicted was the first face-to-face I had with him as an adult, the second time in my life I can remember meeting him—he'd called on the phone, told me to get over to his room with my truck. It was the first time I'd heard his voice on the phone. Two months later he appeared at the shelter where I worked and demanded a bed.

The Pine Street Inn was and still is the largest homeless shelter in Boston. State-of-the-art. When my father arrived I'd already been working there for three years, first as a counselor, then as a caseworker. He wasn't homeless when I first started—marginal, sure, but not homeless. I remember the day he arrived the nights could still be cold. He raised his arms to enter, because every "guest" has to be frisked—no bottles, no weapons. This is the first rule.

Ask me about him now and I'll say, *Howed*. Twelve years. Subsidized. A Section 8. A disability. I'll thank you for paying his rent, unless you're also a Section 8. Unless by the time you read this he's been evicted again. Ask now and I'll say he's a goddamned tree stump, it'll take dynamite to get rid of that motherfucker.

Before he lost his room I could have met him, if I'd chosen to, at any time. He was never difficult to find. No one is, really. Even the months he was barred from the shelter I knew the three or four spots outside where he slept, each one burned into my internal map of the city. Nowadays I can look at a calendar and roughly pinpoint his location. I've seen the inside of his apartment, I know his routine. The first of the month he gets his check, and from this he (hopefully) pays his rent, then buys a gallon or three of vodka. If it is near the first he will be in his room drinking. Easy to find near the first. If it is later in the month he will have to venture out, to soup kitchens for meals, and then he will be harder to track down, at least at midday. He has no phone. If I want to see him I have to go to his apartment building and ring his bell, the bell with my last name taped to it. It will take about a minute for him to buzz me in, his finger stuttering on the button. Or else his apartment will be empty and I will not be buzzed inside. I will then either wander down Commonwealth Avenue looking for him or sit in the local Dunkin' Donuts and wait for him to appear.

If I could distill those years into a television game show I'd call it *The Apologist*. Today's show: "Fathers Left Outside to Rot." And there I'd sit in an ill-fitting suit, one of three or four contestants, looking contrite or defiant or inscrutable under the life-draining lights. At some point, after I tell an abridged version of my story, the host will

Mixtape for City Kids from Dysfunctional but Happy Families, Kids Like Me
(a new form)

When the light from that moon spilled
out of your mother's belly, I tell you,
you were smiling then. We need a name:
but we can't call this *Menace to the Hood*
or *Boys in Society* or no shit like that. You
have been born into a world. Look around.
See that black boy over there running scared,
his old man got a problem & it's a bad one. Mami?
Even though she don't have a job, Mami still
works hard. The last 23 years of her life have been
spent teaching a poet & killing generations
of cockroaches with sky-blue plastic slippers.
These are the people who will love you
with the same love they received, or hopefully
better. You will have enemies too. My enemies
ride jets to parties. They use words like casualties
to speak of murder. Yes, you'll survive. Look at me.
I'm shocked too, I'm supposed to be locked up too,
you escape what I escaped you'd be in Paris
getting fucked up too. My father said...surviving
one thing means another comes & kills you.
He's dead, & so, I trust him. I know this isn't much.
But I wanted to explain this life to you, even if

I had to become, over the years, someone else to do it.
The miracle of Jesus is himself, not what he said or did
about the future. Forget the future. I'd worship someone
who could do that. Then, slowly, Lo is fo e ri bari
Lo is fo e ri bari love is for everybody Love is for
every every body love love love everybody love.



Poet, storyteller, and essayist **Roberto Carlos Garcia** is a self-described "sanchocho [...] of provisions from the Harlem Renaissance, the Spanish Poets of 1929, the Black Arts Movement, the Nuyorican School, and the Modernists." Garcia is rigorously interrogative of himself and the world around him, conveying "nakedness of emotion, intent, and experience," and he writes extensively about the Afro-Latinx and Afro-diasporic experience. His second poetry collection, *black / Maybe: An Afro Lyric*, is available from Willow Books. Roberto's first collection, *Melancolia*, is available from Červená Barva Press. He is the founder of cooperative press Get Fresh Books Publishing.



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holy water (the second coming of drought)

monday night. i've traveled to the house where i grew up. where my parents once lived apart, and still do. where my mother once lived alone, and still does. to check on her dogs that now are my cats. her tenants have been caring for them while she's been in portugal for a month. i hire a pet sitter instead. once if not twice a week i check in on things. my therapist says that's a good thing. i let the dogs out. i play with the cats, who play dead cerberus. i put on my running shoes. i head for the park, where i played tennis with my brother during summer vacations. or strolled sunday mornings instead of being in church. this humble municipal acreage is my lot. this summer has been unrelentingly dry and hot. in this winter that is like dogs and cats. a drought is upon us and we say so what? it's may and october and the romance is dog shit and dried leaves. blue-eyed tony kisses dark-eyed maria on a nearby bench. only the irish have moved out to bergen county and we're following suit. few of us remember what's what: tony and maria met in a factory. tony and maria actually just met. tony and maria are both portuguese. they started before my father left? someone hasn't told us yet. how to look for water in a drought. how to be divining rod and arc. i wonder as i sprint. why the twilight is perfect. i'm rounding the path at a clip. why is the twilight perfect? i finish, and the haze and heat that have built up all day grant me the serenity to notice what can't. and for all that a single line of sweat rolls down my back, moisture too salty too little too late. to save the trees or myself. don't hold it against me or them.

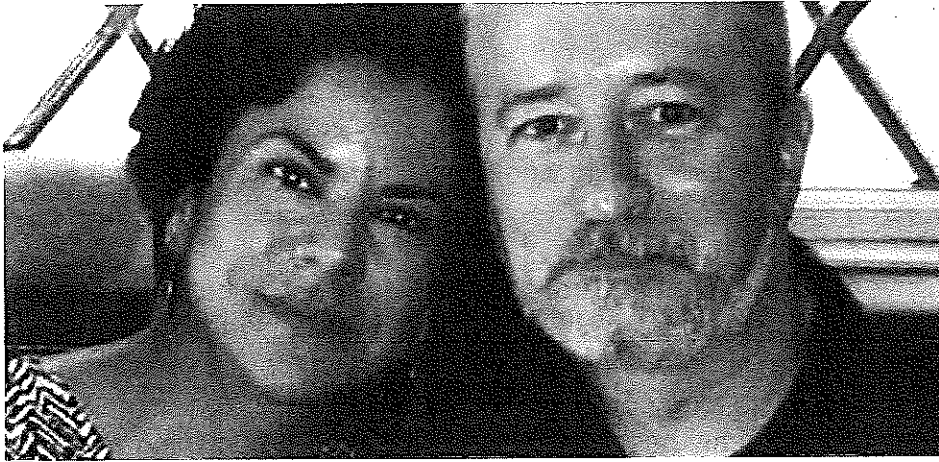
by paula neves (from The Coop: A Poetry Coperative
<https://150kansaspoe.ms.wordpress.com/2022/10/21/two-poems-by-paula-neves/>

Shattered by childbirth

After I lost my baby, part of my mind splintered, too. This is what it looks like to walk back from trauma (excerpted from https://www.salon.com/2014/03/16/shattered_by_childbirth/)

By **NANCY MENDEZ-BOOTH**

PUBLISHED MARCH 16, 2014 12:00AM (EDT)



This is what happened the morning I was to be arrested.

It was Monday, Feb. 11, 2008. I was in bed, under the comforter with my husband, John. His warm hand rested on my hip. The room-darkening shades blocked the sun. There was no light to signal it was morning, or that time had passed since I had gone to bed hours before and never slept. I spent the night hurtling toward the moment when I knew the phone would ring and change everything.

The comforter trapped my and John's body heat. I was a furnace, fueled by anxiety. My tank, pants and the flannel sheets were damp. My heart pounded the firm surface of the mattress, and its rhythm felt irregular. The human heart may have a predetermined number of lifetime beats, and I was blazing through my quota. I thought I might die right there in my bed. That worried me least. Death was better than being revealed as a murderer.

I had murdered my child. Our long-anticipated baby boy, born beautiful and perfect, except he was born dead. He died inside my body where I'd nurtured him for almost nine months. He died in my womb, where babies are supposed to be safest of all, less than one month before he was supposed to emerge alive. The doctor wrote "stillbirth" on my chart, but my baby boy died because I failed him. There must have been a way to know, a sign I missed. Perhaps my baby had knocked or kicked in distress, but my negligence had killed him.

John is an attorney. I knew the different degrees of murder, and the role intentionality plays.

"Did he mean to do it?" I asked John about his clients.

It wouldn't matter in my case. What mattered was that it happened. It happened in my body because I was a failure as a mother: I let my baby die...

No one knew I became something else after the stillbirth. I limited myself to a small number of familiar situations where people saw a few, smiling glimpses of me. No one needed to know how tender the insides of my cheeks were, raw because I clenched them between my molars to keep from crying. People were unsure how to offer help, and my pretending made it harder. It probably prevented some people from trying. I wasn't the old Nancy, and had no idea how, or if I was able to do anything.

"Just breathe," Dr. Berger still reminds me.

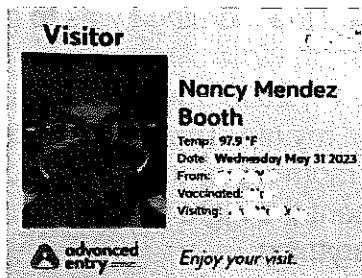
It is so simple. It was all I could handle in those initial weeks and months. Breathing was natural. Anyone could do it, even me.

I'm still a type-A, gold-star driven woman. That has not changed. Jokingly, I often refer to myself as Wonder Woman, but it's no joke that I wish I was. I want superpowers that make me untouchable, able to outrun, leap over, and deflect pain. I've worked for five years to collapse all the Nancys into this one I am today, but I'm not invincible. I'm just one small, real-life woman, not guilty or crazy, just trying my best to live every day without punishing myself.



Nancy Mendez-Booth

June 5 at 3:31 PM · 🧑🏻



Mami and I embarked on another phase of her dementia journey. So much to do, and so much that cannot be done. Always (always) what I can do is write.

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Wed, May 31, 2023: Today Mami was weepy. About everything. Her mother's pasteles. (I agreed. They remain the best.) Growing tobacco on the farm to sell at the market. Thinking about me. (I reminded her, each time, "I'm right here.") Dreaming of her family in Puerto Rico. Losing her mind. The nurse told me Mami refused to take her two meds this morning, which includes the antidepressant that normally covers the river of anxieties and tears under her surface—even before she became ill. I forgot to ask the nurse if she ever tried again during the day and whether Mami finally took her meds. There is only so much I can remember.

From East Eats West by Andrew Lam

INTRODUCTION

Whenever I hear the word *chua*, Vietnamese for "sour," I think of tamarind, the sticky brown fruit that grew in abundance on shading trees in my old schoolyard back in Saigon, and its intense sour-sweet memories inevitably cause my molars to vibrate and my mouth to water. I hear "sour" in English and I don't feel a thing.

And yet, it is in English now that I ply my trade, it is in English that I dream and think, and it is in English that I best express myself. Vietnam, its language, its memories, are reduced to a kind of lullaby, which is to say, visceral and yet out of the quotidian of my life.

Such are the strange bearings of those who lurk between East and West, between languages, between memories and desires. Where the two hemispheres overlap, however, is where I learned and relearned how to mediate opposed ideas and to bridge disparate viewpoints. A barely charted territory, it is fraught with contradictions and tensions, its waters treacherous with the various tugs and undercurrents.

Over the years I have watched the East and West pas de deux as forces of history as well as my own fragmented biography. The differences I learned very early on. In Vietnam you do not look your teachers in the eye unless it is to challenge them. In America if you fail to look your teachers in the eye they may think you shifty, that you have something to hide. Americans are fond of saying, "I love you." Vietnamese don't share words of

affection very easily, if at all. No, they show it; it's all in the gestures—working three jobs so your kids can go to private school, saving the best apple for your spouse while eating the bruised one yourself. Americans celebrate birthdays. Vietnamese light incense and have feasts on death anniversaries of important relatives.

American children can't wait to leave home at eighteen, Vietnamese children stay around long into adulthood, and often even after they marry. In Vietnam individualism is equated with selfishness. America elevates it to an ideology, it demands it: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. America whispers rebellion of the individual against the communal: Follow your dream.

Perhaps it is easier to abandon one system and swallow the new. Then perhaps life wouldn't be so difficult for those who migrate East to West. But the melting pot concept hasn't really worked. It is more like a blender into which differences are forced and then regurgitated as platitudes, sort of like Disney movies, which rewrite all complicated stories toward a single outcome, a thinning, predictable, happily-ever-after formula.

The modern condition, the reality, on the other hand, is messy, defined by mismatch and by an intensifying and growing complexity. Or rather, increasingly it is cosmopolitanism that is the norm. According to the French writer Pascal Bruckner, cosmopolitanism speaks of being rooted in the depths of several layers of memory, in numerous particularities. "It does not collect a trait here or there. It becomes incarnate. It means counterbalancing the land of one's birth with additional homelands." I think of it as something like Michael Ondaatje's novel *The English Patient*, in which a set of complicated characters with variant and divergent histories decide to populate an abandoned villa, and in it they argue and fall in love, and in between they tell each other their stories.

Here's mine. I grew up a patriotic South Vietnamese living in Vietnam during the war. I remember singing the national anthem,

swearing my allegiance to the flag, and promising my soul and body to protect the land and its sacred rice fields and rivers. Wide-eyed child that I was, I believed every word.

But then the war ended and I, along with my family (and eventually a couple of million other Vietnamese), betrayed our agrarian ethos and land-bound sentiments by fleeing overseas to lead a very different life.

These days I regularly travel between East Asia and the United States as an American journalist and writer. My relatives, once all concentrated in Saigon, are scattered across three continents, speaking three and four other languages, becoming citizens of several different countries. Once communal and bound by a common sense of geography, we are now part of a global tribe. Still trying to adjust to the radical shift in our lives—once a very sedentary people, we have become a highly mobile clan with multiple affiliations—we thrive and prosper. It is that transition, that adding on of identity, that effort to adjust, that I mainly write about, both in fiction and nonfiction.

I think of that tongue-tied refugee child at the blackboard in seventh grade drawing pictures of helicopters and rice paddies, trying to tell his story to his new American classmates, sharing what he remembered, what he had lost. He knew it even before he could fully articulate it: between East and West lay a terrain that needed to be charted by stories, fused by his new eyes and imagination, and he needed to tell those stories if he ever hoped to be whole again. Decades later, I'm happy to report that—dancing at the far end of that continuum—he's still doggedly at it.

From American Indian
Stories by
Zitkala-Sä

IMPRESSIONS OF AN INDIAN CHILDHOOD

MY MOTHER

A wigwam of weather-strained canvas stood at the base of some irregularly ascending hills. A footpath wound its way gently down the sloping land till it reached the broad river bottom; creeping through the long swamp grasses that bent over it on either side, it came out on the edge of the Missouri.

Here, morning, noon, and evening, my mother came to draw water from the muddy stream for our household use. Always, when my mother started for the river, I stopped my play to run along with her. She was only of medium height. Often she was sad and silent, at which times her full arched lips were compressed into hard and bitter lines, and shadows fell under her black eyes. Then I clung to her hand and begged to know what made the tears fall.

"Hush; my little daughter must never talk about my tears"; and smiling through them, she patted my head and said, "Now let me see how fast you can run today." Whereupon I tore

away at my highest possible speed, with my long black hair blowing in the breeze.

I was a wild little girl of seven. Loosely clad in a slip of brown buckskin, and light-footed with a pair of soft moccasins on my feet, I was as free as the wind that blew my hair, and no less spirited than a bounding deer. These were my mother's pride,—my wild freedom and overflowing spirits. She taught me no fear save that of intruding myself upon others.

Having gone many paces ahead I stopped, panting for breath, and laughing with glee as my mother watched my every movement. I was not wholly conscious of myself, but was more keenly alive to the fire within. It was as if I were the activity, and my hands and feet were only experiments for my spirit to work upon.

Returning from the river, I tugged beside my mother, with my hand upon the bucket I believed I was carrying. One time, on such a return, I remember a bit of conversation we had. My grown-up cousin, Warca-Ziwin (Sunflower), who was then seventeen, always went to the river alone for water for her mother. Their wigwam was not far from ours; and I saw her daily going to and from the river. I admired my cousin greatly. So I said: "Mother, when I am tall as my cousin Warca-Ziwin, you shall not have to come for water. I will do it for you."

With a strange tremor in her voice which I could not understand, she answered, "If the paleface does not take away from us the river we drink."

"Mother, who is this bad paleface?" I asked.

"My little daughter, he is a sham,—a sickly sham! The bronzed Dakota is the only real man."

I looked up into my mother's face while she spoke; and seeing her bite her lips, I knew she was unhappy. This aroused revenge in my small soul. Stamping my foot on the earth, I cried aloud, "I hate the paleface that makes my mother cry!" Setting the pail of water on the ground, my mother stooped, and stretching her left hand out on the level with my eyes, she placed her other arm about me; she pointed to the hill where my uncle and my only sister lay buried.

"There is what the paleface has done! Since then your father too has been buried in a hill nearer the rising sun. We were once very happy. But the paleface has stolen our lands and driven us hither. Having defrauded us of our land, the paleface forced us away.

"Well, it happened on the day we moved camp that your sister and uncle were both very sick. Many others were ailing, but there seemed to be no help. We traveled many days and nights; not in the grand, happy way that we moved camp when I was a little girl, but we were driven, my child, driven like a herd of buffalo. With every step, your sister, who was not as large as you are now, shrieked with the painful jar until she was hoarse with crying. She grew more and more feverish. Her little hands and cheeks were burning hot. Her little lips were parched and dry, but she would not drink the water I gave her. Then I discovered that her throat was swollen and red. My poor child, how I cried with her because the Great Spirit had forgotten us!

"At last, when we reached this western country, on the first weary night your sister died. And soon your uncle died also, leaving a widow and an orphan daughter, your cousin Warca-Ziwin. Both your sister and uncle might have been happy with us today, had it not been for the heartless paleface."