

PAULETTA HANSEL

The Neighborhoods of Literary Cincinnati: A Personal History

I first saw Cincinnati's skyline in 1979. I had taken the Greyhound from Beckley, West Virginia, where I'd gone to college, to be interviewed for a spot in Xavier University's graduate Montessori program. As the driver rounded the Cut in the Hill, the city splayed out before me. My future. Maybe even my destiny. (At twenty years old I was prone to such hyperbole.) I had grown up in small towns in southeastern Kentucky, never with more than a few thousand people. When I moved here, I didn't understand that Cincinnati was not just one town, but many. It makes sense, too, to talk about "the literary community" in Cincinnati, the various groupings of poets and writers, not as a singular entity but as "neighborhoods." While there are benefits to such divisions, just like there are for geographic neighborhoods—a sense of belonging, or awareness of each person's necessity to the group's well-being—there can be serious drawbacks: racial segregation, unequal resources, and isolation from power.

With the pressures of graduate school and the pull back toward my Appalachian writing community, I didn't make connections in the city until the early '80s. Richard Hague, who has his feet in both Cincinnati and Appalachia, was my entry point. Dick came to the area in the '60s as an undergrad. He attended Xavier University and was part of its Mermaid Tavern writers' group, along with a few other Cincinnati literary luminaries including Michael Henson and the late Joseph Enzweiler. As far as I can tell, the only Cincinnati literary organizations that predate Dick are the men's-only Cincinnati Literary Club, of which he is a member, and the Greater Cincinnati Writers League, founded in the 1930s and still a hub for poets looking for feedback on new work.

Dick Hague went on to teach at Purcell Marian High School and while there began a series of writing workshops held in his home for both teens

and adults. He remembers the scene in the late '70s and '80s as being very grassroots, “front-room stuff,” as he calls it, taking place in parlors and dining rooms. At that time, too, the Cincinnati Recreation Commission actively supported local writers. I helped judge their Neighborhood Poet Laureate Contest, and the commission also mailed (with a stamp and everything) a mimeographed newsletter called *Rough Draft* promoting open submissions, readings, and workshops. The brick building where Ravine, McMillan, and Fairview intersect (now housing the Freedom Tattoo Parlor) was the Fairview Arts Center, a CRC-run hub for readings attended by a wide swath of writers.

The Center's proximity to the University of Cincinnati was likely no accident. But in my experience, there has been very little interaction between town and gown, and Dick Hague confirms that's been the case during his fifty years living and writing in Cincinnati. It has not always been easy to find out about events on campus, and in the plethora of readings around town—even those in UC's Clifton neighborhood—students and faculty have tended to be scarce.

This separation was not always so extreme. In the early 1970s there was a narrowing of the gap thanks to the work of UC poets/professors Jim Bertolino and Dallas Wiebe. In a 2007 interview in the *Cortland Review*, Bertolino outlined his community-based work in Cincinnati, including cofounding the *Cincinnati Poetry Review* and the Cincinnati Area Poetry Project. CAAP sponsored publications and readings with funding from the Ohio Arts Council and the federal CETA program (Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1973), which supported “writers and artists who were at risk of not making a living,” Bertolino says. In fact, Dick Hague's first chapbook was published by CAAP.

Dallas Wiebe, the other founder of the *Cincinnati Poetry Review*, was also instrumental in a second wave of gap-bridging in the '80s, this time with his UC colleagues Terry Stokes and Austin Wright, and a young UC grad/College of Mount St. Joseph faculty member, Jeff Hillard. Jeff told me that Wiebe once asked him how many poets outside UC he knew, and between them they managed to get beyond only one hand's worth of fingers. The Cincinnati Writers Project (“celebrating local writers since 1987”), an independent nonprofit, grew out of this assessment. Jeff said its academic founders had no interest in involving the universities or their writers, who had access to plenty of resources; instead, they wanted to provide community writers information about the world of publishers, editors, and agents, much more difficult to access in the predigital age. They met monthly, held a small-press bookfair, brought in established writers as speakers, and encouraged members to give back in

various ways, including serving as tutors in the literacy center that hosted them. The CWP still exists, though it switched to a workshopping focus when Hillard and Wiebe handed it over to members including Jerry Judge, Karen George, and the late Carol Feiser Laque, a retired UC professor of poetry and comparative literature who was herself a force in the literary scene.

I've been here a long time, so I've seen literary neighborhoods come and go, change and be changed. Dick Hague told me that most of his experience with writing communities is that they have "grown from the ground up, rather than been passed down from the academy." I agree, but I've also seen that the growth is usually seeded by just one or two people, and when those people leave or change focus, what they have created often does not survive. Cincinnati's two most recent attempts to form unified writing organizations, InkTank and Chase Public, did not outlive their founders' departures. Things only last when the ground is consistently tended, over time, and as Dick Hague puts it, in a place where a "tradition" of writing and community has been established.

Yet anyone who has ever tried to eradicate grass knows that those roots are tenacious. Luckily, there has been a continuing stream of folks willing to water the various lawns. Jim Palmarini arrived in Cincinnati in 1986, having cut his poetic teeth at Kent State University in the '70s. Then, the poetry scenes in Kent and Cincinnati organized themselves in similar ways, right down to the role of CETA. But in Kent there is still a direct through-line from the early academic/community partnerships to what is happening now, including the tradition of an off-campus reading series; the annual Jawbone Poetry Festival, now in its thirty-fifth year; and KSU's Wick Poetry Center, which is active in community poetry programming throughout northern Ohio.

Jim said, "When I looked around and saw there was not a poetry scene in Cincinnati, it just meant I was going to make one." And he has. Jim rattled off the list of places he has hosted reading series, starting with a collaboration with Aralee Strange at Case Gallery, and then on to many others, as detailed in his poem in this section. When Strange died in 2013, Jim and writer Mark Flanigan started a new series in her honor, Word of Mouth Cincinnati, named after her Athens, Georgia, series. Held at MOTR Pub, this is now Cincinnati's longest running feature/open mic; Jim and Mark have made ongoing and conscious efforts at inclusiveness and often choose those who perform in the open-mic portion for featured-reader positions later. Jim told me, "The wonderful thing about the poetry scene here is that it is rich and varied, cross-generational communities and perspectives that are fully relevant to our times. On the

flip side, it seems very partitioned off by a delineation of opinions about what's poetry and what's not."

Among these partitions can be spoken word versus what some call "page poetry." MoPoetry Phillips and Kim "DuWaup" Bolden, two dynamic women of color from the spoken-word tradition, are instrumental in the vibrancy of today's lit scene. The longstanding DuWaup's Poetry Slam showcases local and national touring artists. DuWaup also manages the poetry program at Elementz, a youth-oriented cultural arts center. MoPoetry cofounded Regal Rhythms Poetry, which runs Hit the Mic Cincy and provides teaching and performing poets for clients including Juneteenth Cincinnati, school systems, and businesses like Procter & Gamble and Fifth Third Bank. Through Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, DuWaup's Bold Creative Solutions has offered a workshop series on the business of being an artist, not unlike those early CETA-funded activities designed to help artists earn livings.

DuWaup and MoPoetry discussed with me how the various poetry communities in Cincinnati do and do not intersect. Both women were emphatic that while "like may attract like," we have to create shared spaces, especially in what can be a racially divided literary scene. DuWaup said, "The biases we have exist, so we might as well recognize them for what they are, but still extend ourselves to others so that we do feel like we can be included if we want to be. I have to feel welcome into your space, you have to feel welcome into my space. Culturally, [my slam's] a black thing, I won't pretend it's not—but if you look around at the people participating, you will see how it is made up of different cultures and different races." DuWaup is interested in developing artistic connections across generations; she pointed out that sometimes "welcome" means an actual invitation. MoPoetry doesn't wait for that; she is always looking for ways to work with people who are different from her, purposefully going into situations where she is not expected to show up—taking spoken word into poetry readings and reading from her book at slams. "Iron sharpens iron," she says. "Go where you feel like you are appreciated and go where you are not."

Ellen Austin-Li fell in love with poetry as a student at Women Writing for (a) Change around 2010. Founded in 1991 by Mary Pierce Brosmer as a feminist alternative to academic writing programs, WWf(a)C has provided programs for thousands of writers—including me over a decade before Ellen, and MoPoetry Phillips a few years after her. The second community for Ellen formed at Rohs Street Café in Clifton Heights, not far from the old Fairview Arts Center. Ellen told me that this young, racially integrated, and welcoming

open-mic group made her aware that there were “pockets of poets” throughout the city, often working in isolation from each other but happy to come together when called. Now it is Ellen who does the calling; since 2018 she has cohosted a reading series at Sitwell’s Coffeehouse in Clifton. She chooses her mix of featured readers to highlight a multiplicity of styles and affiliations; the open-mic crowd reflects this too and even has recently included some undergraduate and graduate creative writing students.

While the early efforts by UC faculty members didn’t become a lasting tradition, UC’s branch colleges in Blue Ash and Clermont County have been more consistent in engagement, as has Mount St. Joe, where Jeff Hillard taught a Cincinnati Authors class until his retirement. Cincinnati State was the only university to host events during my term as the first Poet Laureate of Cincinnati (2016–2018). Recently, Xavier University invited local writers as audience to a poetry symposium in its new Humanities Reading Room, and across the river, Northern Kentucky University has drawn from its locally based creative writing students and alumni for on- and off-campus readings. Thomas More University, just west of NKU, has a tradition of literary partnerships, primarily spearheaded by Sherry Cook Stanforth, who told me that she hopes to “teach what it means to be part of a supportive literary community.” Though she recently left to devote time to her new Originary Arts Initiative, her Creative Writing Vision Program at Thomas More served student and regional writers and included community-based writers-in-residence.

Which brings us to UC’s current efforts to bridge the gown/town divide. The Elliston Poetry Room is a collection established in 1946 and endowed by George Elliston, the newspaperwoman and poetry philanthropist, once a charter member of the Greater Cincinnati Writers League. Community engagement is actually part of Curator Michael Peterson’s job description. He and graduate assistant Maia Morgan have developed partnerships that take university resources out to places as varied as parks, prisons, schools, and even Spring Grove Cemetery. Their work to bring regional poets on campus—not just as audience but as guest curators (Cincinnati Youth Poet Laureate Rimel Kamran is building its Pakistani poetry collection, for example) and as readers—is another transformation: Peterson and Langsam Library’s Ben Kline and Melissa Cox Norris are working together on a quarterly series called Poetry Stacked, at which a poet on UC’s faculty or staff, a UC student, and a regional poet share the mic in the stacks of Langsam, with pre- and post-events hosted by the Elliston Room.

Poet Jerry Judge, active since the '90s in both the Cincinnati Writers Project and the Greater Cincinnati Writers League, told me that the local poetry scene has never been as alive as it is now. He credited, in part, the work of many I have mentioned here, and some I have not, including the abundance of small presses, bookstores, and libraries. Jerry says the key ingredient is the mutual support and lack of competition among us. I can't help but wonder if disinterest from "the academy" has been beneficial to this self-sustaining ecosystem, and so I am encouraged to note the grassroots and egalitarian tenor of these new UC projects. Poet Ben Kline is quick to point out that he is staff, not faculty. Like me, Kline grew up in a small Appalachian town and went to college in West Virginia. He was similarly taken aback by all the "neighborhood" allegiances when he arrived here in 1999. Poetry Stacked might be considered an offshoot of his Poetry Afield Series, which started in 2018 at a local bar because he wanted to host a big raucous poetry party, with an emphasis on poetry as storytelling. Michael Peterson, who came to Cincinnati as a student in its creative writing doctoral program, says, "This is a poets' town. You can't throw a rock without hitting another poet." He sees part of the Elliston Poetry Room's mission as seeking out connections to this wide-ranging community, always asking himself, "Is this what George would have wanted?"

Maybe I don't know every poet in town, but I am not more than a degree of separation from most. I do believe this is, in part, my small-town Appalachian roots showing. And those Appalachian roots—not just mine, but those of Richard Hague, MoPoetry Phillips, Mary Pierce Brosmer, Sherry Cook Stanforth, Ben Kline, and more—may have something to do with how our literary community continues to evolve. Cincinnati is not within the Appalachian region but is a migrant center. I had not planned to mention our urban Appalachian writing scene, but the topic kept coming up in interviews, mostly around mentorship and the lack of separation between established and "emerging" writers. As a teenage poet, I was swept into the Appalachian Literary Renaissance, connected both in time and spirit to the Black Arts and other identity-based movements. For us, community was survival, sometimes literally, and always in order to have a voice: If we wanted to be published, we created a journal. If we wanted to develop our craft, we found someone to teach us. Jim Palmarini notes that along the spectrum of what he calls academic poets and street poets, I have not chosen a side. And there is truth in that; I believe that my role is to both teach and be taught. While I hesitate to generalize about cultural groups, scholars have talked about the "leveling

tendency” among Appalachians, the desire to be on an equal footing across divisions. Thinking of this sent me back to Loyal Jones’s Appalachian values list; from those, personalism, hospitality, and neighborliness are traits I hope define Cincinnati’s literary community. In Ben Kline’s words, “a big old poetry party,” whether sprawling the streets in the shadow of Cincinnati’s skyline, or a moveable feast tucked away in neighborhoods throughout.

JIM PALMARINI

WELCOME TO THE READING: A Five-Decade Tour of Cincinnati's Aural/ Oral Poetry Scene

WELCOME TO THE READING

AT

Cage Gallery on Fourth in '87, where a curved picture window waved and beckoned poets, artists, and the curious—me among them—to the black trench coat that was Aralee Strange, approaching with “What’s all this poetry business and what are we going to do about it.” And thus, it began.

WELCOME TO THE READING

AT

Some looming brick four-story abandoned just down Fourth, the OH river wind blowing maybe the winter dead, maybe the living, one and all singing up Broadway and down to us sitting with two junkie poets in their cathedral where we fled to when the power failed at Cage one night—“It’s cold but cool” they said, “but whaddya want, it’s February—add some kerosene to the honeycomb and let’s read. By the way, can you hold this spoon while I fix?”

WELCOME TO THE READING

AT

Newport’s Southgate House 1—the second-floor once-upon-a-bar from the '50s that Aralee and I scrubbed out and prayed to on our hands and knees, then on grand-opening reading night had to search the strip clubs of Monmouth cause Roger—the ne’er-do-well who bedded in the space—had the only door key and wasn’t a poetry fan, though he did once claim to me that speaking in tongues was granted by god and thus the only true poetry.

WELCOME TO THE READING

AT

OTR’s Kaldi’s—holy holy Kaldi’s with its goat and books that nobody bought

but everybody read while Main Street seers spun unimpeachable lies or myths—depending on the drink that depended on the hour that depended on the tottering stool of mortality that day—all led by Saint Ken Kawaji hanging in a green pew with the Buddha at his side, mortal soul in his pocket sobering up the lot of them daily so declarations and poems could begin anew. All this blessed churn before Vine and Main got swallowed up by restaurants with names I can't pronounce and don't want to. Holy holy Kaldi's, a space that seemed unimaginable without poets and so it gloriously was until it wasn't anymore and the poets and the goat and books and the prophets vanished—we look for them still, seek answers from the shadows lurking in Gabriel's Corner.

WELCOME TO THE READING

AT

The Southgate 2—one night when the moon and stars and a couple of rats let the rain have its way with the room's ancient roof beams, our space flooded and drove us to the main concert room—a cavernous echoey haunt of '40s big-band ghosts who no doubt wondered what the hell we were doing there. The balcony beckoned and we spread out in the arch, shouted poems across the void, filled up those spirits you bet, and left the door open in case the phantoms wanted to make a run for it or maybe for Roger if he perhaps wanted to turn loose his chorus of tongues to save us all.

WELCOME TO THE READING

AT

Sitwell's 1 and Sitwell's 2 in Clifton—

One, a basement beatnik spot with a back room guarded by a beaded curtain—"Keeps the fools out and the saints in," said proprietor Lisa, who seemed to accept me as something in between.

Two, uptown on Ludlow, if there is such a thing. "You can't read in the center of the room—that's where the regulars are," said the management. "You might disturb them." Well, yes, said I—poets do disturb. The door was shown.

WELCOME TO THE READING

AT

Newport's York Street Café upstairs—a place that summoned up my catholic youth, choir book in hand, narthex never far away for it was the most church-like venue ever given its grand arch windowframe-ing every poet and penitent who heard the space's call but as the owners were not saints, when a bar mirror and a poet had a disagreement, peace in the kingdom was cast asunder. The door was, again, shown.

WELCOME TO THE READING

AT

The InkTank storefront on Main, the only reading series I ever knew borne of a concept, until the entrepreneur Kathy H lost her laptop to a couple of junkies while we were outside between sets contemplating whether the sirens of the Parkway were a sign of the apocalypse—instead maybe it was just those two same junkie poets who froze me out on Fourth years before.

WELCOME TO THE READING

AT

A storefront coffee shop in Norwood on Montgomery whose sole sign was a neon notice—coffee, coffee, coffee. And that is all they had. A teen slam it was, won by my eldest daughter, Lucia, and the esteemed Bill Polak's daughter, Kate. Closed two months later—dental office last I looked.

WELCOME TO THE READING

AT

The Southgate 3 in the first-floor pool room on a night we simply could not find Roger. I begged the owner Ross Raleigh for a key of our own. "No parties or wedding receptions allowed," said Ross. Aralee and I complied and stuck with poetry, once a month, though I'm not so sure our readings weren't their own kind of celebration—just a union of poets in sickness or health, speaking in tongues.

WELCOME TO THE READING

AT

The joint with the steel pig down the way from MOTR on Main—cop bar now, I think, or maybe not. One night a poet kicked it good, maybe the guy who had the mirror encounter at York Street. He came up howling, limped back in and riffed a poem about how much he hated pigs and loved dogs. Never saw him again though. Poets and pork. Poets and dogs—what it is, I think, is the soulful eyes of each and we're jealous or grateful for what they know.

WELCOME TO THE READING

AT

A sushi bar on Ninth downtown—weirdly memorable for its mix of RaElf and other poets cranking words while raw fish was being whack whack whacked a few feet away. I had no compassion for the eyes of fish until I heard the great Bob Kaufman croon of a fish with no eyes at SF's North Beach Tivoli. Bob, you were right—there is no true blindness under god's eye.

WELCOME TO THE READING

AT

Northside's Comet—a roadside north-star bar with a honky-tonk feel, where burritos ruled and a whiff of Texas seemed afoot. Memorable as the first place I ever heard Mark Flanigan tell one of his wry tales of woe and redemption. Mark—why is it that the women in our lives are always smarter than we are?

WELCOME TO THE READING

AT

Highland Coffee House in Clifton, where the owner asked if we could quiet down—we moved to the outside courtyard and got louder.

WELCOME TO THE READING

AT

Stenger's OTR restaurant in a back room that drew a lunch crowd who were astounded and moved that one could write a poem about roast beef—the house specialty. No pigs and dogs were discussed, horses neither.

WELCOME TO THE READING

AT

Downtown's Milner Hotel, wrecking ball spent years ago, then a spontaneous but not unappreciated bar ambush of a place on the route of the now-forgotten '80s three-day poetry fest Khumba the River, spoken of only by those who were there, and you know who you are.

WELCOME TO THE READING

AT

Place called 1313 Vine—reborn today as a shiny OTR edifice. Used to be a dangerous fun house of wires, rebar, and unmoored concrete all held together by squatting artists and probably those two junkies. It was the Khumba's ghost light for a few days. Maybe those voices are still humming under the eaves, holding the whole place up and living it up with the Kaldi's crew and Roger, Aralee, and Kawaji looking out for the whole incorrigible lot.

WELCOME TO THE READING

AT

The Southgate 4: fifteen years down the road, Aralee and I on an afternoon run stoned revisit the main bar where owner Ross Raleigh, stool-bound and lit, upon witnessing our arrival, said—“bout time you guys showed up: When's the reading start?” Blessed be you, Ross, said I, and Aralee offered a hand as the tongues began their chant to the bell tower, to Fourth Street, to Kaldis, to

this and that lost place of coffee and books and words spoken into the ether—
we are here we are here and are not leaving, they say I say you say.

WELCOME TO THE READING

AT

MOTR MOTR MOTR—beloved Word of Mouth church of the ongoing spoken yawp and blessed as the venue that has never thrown me or any other poet out, who stepped up and mouthed off and listened to their brethren. Who will be first? Is it you? Is it me?

It starts now and will be evermore because for it not to would summon an unbearable silence that I cannot imagine. We are poet apostles who make the air and ourselves accountable with our voices, calling out the world and asking others to bear witness to what makes us human. Now . . .

Welcome to the reading. Welcome to the reading. Welcome to the reading.

TYRONE WILLIAMS

Arrested Cross-Fertilization

By the time this issue of *The Cincinnati Review* appears, it will have been forty years since I left my hometown, Detroit. And until January 2023, all those years were spent in Cincinnati, teaching at Xavier University. I moved to the Queen City of the Midwest in August 1983. Soon after, I received that dreaded “Dear John” letter from my Detroit-based girlfriend, effectively unmooring me from one of my foundations in the Motor City. I began to seek out, as a kind of distraction, whatever literary scenes there were in this new and unfamiliar city in southern Ohio, a city I knew only because when I was a kid, we’d often passed through it—without stopping—on our way to Alabama to visit our relatives.

One place I found was the poetry reading series Upstairs at Grammer’s in Over-the-Rhine, where I first heard some of Cincinnati’s best-known poets—Ralph La Charity, Richard Hague, etc.—and which later migrated over to Arnold’s Bar & Grill. Yet that series, along with a few others, seemed to me fairly narrow in the type of readers and poetry it showcased (La Charity’s tremulous, oracular recitations being the exception), emphasizing Midwestern-Southern sentiments within the formal structures of traditional narrative and lyric poetics. And though, as a Black instructor new to the area, I’d attempted to broaden my own local contacts by writing a brief letter to the African American Studies program at the University of Cincinnati (I never got a response), I had, as it happened, my own narrow perspective on the poetry scene in the city.

So, having realized that “Midwestern” and “Southern” were too general and abstract as categories to capture what I was actually seeing and hearing, I wiped the slate clean and went out exploring once again. I started attending some of the concerts and readings at Southgate House in Covington, Kentucky, where I heard the late (and underrated) Michelle Boisseau, and a little later, York Street Café in Newport, Kentucky. However, when venues like Mockbee (Brighton), Publico (Over-the-Rhine), and especially Chase Public

in Northside opened up, my faith and hope were renewed. Here were reading series with a little more edge to them, fiercely anti-academic and adventurous. Yet these new series still seemed to attract their own homogenous audiences— younger than the Arnold's/Grammer's/York Street crowd but just as white, at least to my eyes. Some drifted in from the Art Academy; others were the protégés of the new and young creative writing faculty at Miami University, cris cheek and Cathy Wagner. Both not only brought a spirit of adventure to the writing program at Miami but insisted on creating varied writing communities in and around Cincinnati. As an academic myself, I still had a sense that the multiple poetry scenes, though exciting, were proceeding along more or less parallel tracks.

For myself, I still patronized the academic poetry readings on Friday afternoons in the Elliston Room in the Langsam Library at the University of Cincinnati. These were certainly within my comfort zone since they resembled the poetry readings in State Hall on the campus of my old Detroit college, Wayne State University. By now—the mid and late 1990s—the spoken-word phenomenon was ubiquitous except, it seemed, in Cincinnati. I could not find any venues that featured performance poetry until I started visiting places like the Greenwich Tavern on Gilbert, the Brew House on East McMillan, and the old Sitwell's on Ludlow. Yet as I zipped back and forth across the neighborhoods of the city, going from academic poetry reading to upstart experimental forays, I had a sense that there was no contact between these series, much less cross-fertilization. Had the walls between these groups been raised by mutual agreement? Was it a matter of snobbery? Reverse snobbery? Class bias? Racism?

Because the academic reading series at UC, Xavier, and Miami seemed predictably white and middle-class—one notable exception being the Marjorie Cook Conference on Black poetry and poets at Miami—I began to think about ways to bring these various communities into poetic dialogue. I'd already started working with the Greater Cincinnati Writers League in the late 1990s and began inviting its members to some of the readings at Xavier. Around the same time, I'd seen the spoken-word collective 144K perform several times and had become friendly with a couple members. I invited them to Xavier to hear Michael Palmer read. Two members showed up, and they definitely stood out, not only because they—and I—were the only Black people in the room but also because their street dress stood in marked contrast to the college attire (blue jeans, sneakers, T-shirts, etc.) of the students in attendance.

Of course, as with the march to integration during the Civil Rights era, my attempt at cross-fertilization turned out largely to be a one-way street. While poets from local poetry communities would occasionally show up for our academic poetry readings, the reverse was rarely the case. Students who thought nothing of crowding into cars to hit dive bars and clubs in “urban” enclaves rarely showed up for poetry events—spoken word, performance poetry, or “straight” readings—in the city.

That said, I believe the best—and so, most disappointing—opportunity to bring disparate poetry scenes together was the InkTank project. In 2004 Kathy Holwadel approached me about her plan to bring the various Cincinnati communities together in the wake of the April 2001 riots. She felt that a center focused on writing, on art, could help, in her words, “heal the racial divisions.” Thus InkTank was created in 2004, housed initially at 1311 Main Street in the neighborhood most affected by the riots, Over-the-Rhine. From the start, I and the rest of the Board (Peter Block, Pat Clifford, Jim Crossett, Jane Durrell, Richard Hague, Benjamin Hughes, Sarah Anne Strickley, Jeff Syrone, Dana Ward, and Chris Wilkey) envisioned the organization as a multifaceted nexus where residents and students from OTR, secondary schools, and regional universities could come together to hold readings, create publications, and conduct workshops. And for a while—until 2008—InkTank served its purpose: an outlet where people from all classes, genders, and races could celebrate writing. On most Friday evenings there were open poetry readings, and residents of OTR, students from the Art Academy, and ordinary citizens would show up to read, to listen, and to learn from one another. The workshops, held on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, were very successful in reaching young people in the area. Bill and Lisa Howe had even more success when they added visual arts workshops to the repertoire. InkTank also started in-school writing programs, sending writers and artists into public middle and high schools. Still, for all the ethnic, racial, and economic diversity evident at the readings and workshops, the events did not succeed in attracting the older audiences interested in poetry, those individuals that held memberships in, for example, the Mercantile Library poetry reading group or the Greater Cincinnati Writers League. And then the economic realities of Over-the-Rhine—specifically, the start-and-stop attempts at gentrification as a solution to the poverty of its residents—drove the organization into financial hardship. Despite our attempts to keep the InkTank alive by moving to cheaper offices up Main Street toward Liberty, we finally admitted defeat, closing the doors in 2008. It was perhaps

more than ironic that the organization's last location—at 14th and Main—was just a few blocks east of where Timothy Thomas had been killed by a police officer seven years earlier, sparking the riot from whose ashes InkTank was born.

I don't think the changes that I observed in the Cincinnati poetry scene from 1983 to 2008 are unique. I'm in Buffalo now, teaching in the Poetics Program and English Department at SUNY, and one of the first things a member of a community poetry organization told me is that he hoped I would be "different" than my predecessor, who apparently could not have cared less about the poetry scene outside the university. One difference here, however, is that the Poetics Program has most, if not all, of its poetry readings off-campus at the Just Buffalo Literary Center, the largest of the local poetry organizations. I haven't been to enough events at the center, or anywhere else for that matter, to know if cross-fertilization among the poetry scenes in Buffalo is really happening. I'm in the same situation I was forty years ago when I arrived in Cincinnati, except I'm a lot older and have less nocturnal energy. But I've always suspected that getting poetry readings out of the halls of academia was not a bad way to start if you want to bring as many poetry scenes together as possible.

L. S. KLATT

Kenneth Koch, Cincinnati, Poet of Confetti

My life was in the poem and just outside it.
Nothing was written as it “really happened”
But all took place as rhyme and chance decided.

—KENNETH KOCH, “SEASONS ON EARTH”

I tend to think of Kenneth Koch as a father figure, my surrogate parent-in-poetry. He was born in 1925, predating the birth of my actual father by just a year. He attended Cincinnati’s Walnut Hills High School, where my own dad would later settle into a long and productive teaching career. As a soldier, Koch was hospitalized on Guam in the South Pacific at the same time his counterpart, Mark Klatt, was on the island guarding Japanese prisoners of war. They both were seventy-seven when they passed away.

Koch, you could say, was the bohemian father (bizarro dad) I never met—never met, that is, until I confronted him twenty years ago in David Lehman’s *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (Doubleday, 1998). I was stunned to learn that Koch was from my native Cincinnati, as no famous poet I knew hailed from the Queen City. Apologies to Phoebe Cary, Raymond Garfield Dandridge, William Matthews, and my versifying contemporaries; I was embarrassingly clueless about the local literary scene.

Who was this guy Lehman called “our funniest poet,” a jester who, in the phrasing of John Hollander, fooled around with the “playful sublime?”

Still, I kept Koch at arm’s length. I approached him as I do most charismatic poets who catch my eye: circumspectly. I danced around the edges of his work, worried that his feverish turns of phrase would infect me, and made forays into the poems while always looking for an exit. I was attracted to Koch’s experiments, harebrained as some of them are, and wondered what, if anything, of his Midwest upbringing inspired them. But I was miffed that he appeared to hold no special regard for his hometown. In fact, he left Cincinnati

for Harvard (then New York) as soon as he could, labeling his departure “THE ESCAPE.” Rather than cherish the city I am so fond of, he seemed imprisoned by its “bourgeois” sensibility.

Minus the country club to which his family belonged, I’m not sure what was “bougie” about the Avondale neighborhood where he came of age or how specifically his environs stifled him. No doubt, Cincinnati proper with its reputation for political conservatism must have seemed a little WASPY and uptight to any teenager feeling footloose or outright rebellious. But in many respects his hometown showed itself to be arts-forward and progressive, just the kind of cultural hothouse where a poet still green could germinate.

As a boy, Koch would likely have been exposed to the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, known for premiering works by Gustav Mahler and Aaron Copland, cutting-edge composers of the Jewish diaspora. He apparently also spent time in Eden Park at the Cincinnati Art Museum, the oldest such museum west of the Alleghenies (or so its website claims) and not averse to exhibiting works of the vanguard. And he would have had opportunity to frequent America’s first professional theatre for young audiences, the Children’s Theatre of Cincinnati.

These were places where teachers regularly led students to aggrandize their creative selves. I know; years after Koch, I was one of them. To sit in the velvet-cushioned seats of the Taft Theatre, watch the houselights come down, and witness a spectacle designed specifically for schoolchildren was metamorphic if also *de rigueur*.

What, then, was lacking artistically for Koch on the banks of the Ohio? Well, for one thing, Koch did not see himself as a regionalist or a landscape poet but as a poet of the inventive. It wasn’t that he was uninterested in naming what was around him; it’s simply that for him the inner world held so much more raw energy, and this inner world was reserved for play, not documentary. While he eventually discovered a mode that could render the “vacant lots in Cincinnati, . . . [the] suburban houses, the gutters, the automobiles, the schoolyards,” he was more invested in fresh expression and the imagination than in poems fixed on one place. Consider this impromptu poetic object lesson from his talk “Educating the Imagination,” composed in the manner of Walt Whitman, and Koch’s ensuing commentary.

I see the piece of paper and I pick it up.

I look at the piece of paper and see what’s written on it.

I read the words and they’re good words and I’m reading them to you.

It's terrific but what am I saying? The music makes it say something. And there's always a possibility that once you get going in this motorboat, it's going to go somewhere.

Koch's ambitions elsewhere had to do with language itself, how it sings, how it surprises. To pursue such a poetry, he felt he needed a "bigger world" than Cincinnati, someplace aesthetically adventurous and expansive like Paris. Or New York. Lehman argues that New York was especially appealing to Koch and his comrade-in-letters John Ashbery because, as Ashbery had once written, New York is "a logarithm / Of other cities."

The irony is that around the year Koch was leaving Cincinnati and its so-called provincialism, the illustrator Charley Harper was moving *to* Cincinnati for its cosmopolitanism. Harper arrived from Buckhannon, West Virginia, to study at the Art Academy. There he discovered abstract painting and began to model his own design aesthetic after modernists like Paul Klee and Ben Shahn. Harper's iconic bird, fish, and animal serigraphs, under their influence and others', favor geometric shapes and draftsman-precise lines. The creatures that animate his oeuvre are instantly recognizable but also hyper-stylized, decidedly *unnatural*.

Charley Harper is an example of a near contemporary of Koch's producing whimsical, innovative artwork in the poet's old haunts. Harper's pilgrimage to Cincinnati seems to have been motivated by an impulse similar to the one that took Koch away. Both felt a devotion to creativity that required broader horizons than their birthplaces could provide, even if that meant relocating and abandoning family, friends, and neighbors. The call of the artist, for them, was spirited, certainly radical.

But Koch went further than Harper in this regard. As Lehman points out, Koch sought a "band of rivals" who equaled his enthusiasm, and found them in John Ashbery, James Schuyler, and Frank O'Hara. In Manhattan, he could count on a constant surge of artistic anarchy as well as several favorite hot spots for his circle of painters, poets, and musicians to drink at and talk shop: the Club, the San Remo, the Cedar Tavern. Could Cincinnati boast an equally "vital center"?

New York notwithstanding, Koch viewed himself primarily as a citizen of language itself. He took up residence in poems that made him feel the gorgeous and "luscious" intensity of words. The best poets could lead him to a "deliberate happiness" that he sought to replicate in lyric outbursts and sonic collisions. The poems didn't have to mean; they had to radiate. "What I was

doing and what my friends were doing in poetry was to get rid of the old, fat referential difficulty in order to break everything down into splashes, dots, and cubes and put it back together in an interesting way,” Koch said in “Educating the Imagination.” Such a method didn’t typically re-create a scene or memory. Place, in his poems, was relatively unimportant. The goal instead was verbal explosives, imaginative confetti:

Cherrywood avalanche, my statue of you
Is still standing in Toledo, Ohio.
O places, summer, boredom, the static of an acrobatic blue!

And I made an amazing zinc airliner
It is standing this day in the Minneapolis zoo . . .

Old times are not so long ago, plaster-of-paris haircut! (“The Artist”)

Like Toledo and Minneapolis, Cincinnati is referred to in *The Collected Poems*—along with dozens of other cities and states. These references indicate a rambling imagination in search of a composite American identity much like Whitman’s in *Leaves of Grass*. But unlike Whitman’s, Koch’s touring veers into the bizarre. The thinking is erratic; the lines go haywire. What fun! The New York School of Poets, after all, believed a poem is a playground where words run away with themselves, their exercise elastic and fluid. The poem’s recreational space, sealed off from the same old same old, makes room for recklessness that verges on nonsense but that is, in fact, generative new sense.

But how can this maelstrom be appealing? do you like menageries? my god
Most people want a man! So here I am
I have a pheasant in my reminders I have a goshawk in my clouds. (“Alive
for an Instant”)

Said Koch about his kinetic exuberance: “Of course, everything, once it is written about, even if it’s a wild chaos, is bound eventually to become itself a sort of subject. I wanted to keep my subject up in the air as long as possible.”

After decades of offbeat projects, seemingly rootless, Koch was ready to settle down in the discursive and put the subject first, indeed, late in life, to turn to himself as subject. In *New Addresses*, published in 2000, two years before he died, he writes more transparently about his past and with more attention to the local. Time, as well as distance, now makes it possible for him to reflect on how the distinct geography of a region mapped onto his psyche, as in “To the

Ohio,” or the extent to which his ethnicity played a part in shaping his perspective, as in “To Jewishness.” In these poems, Koch’s personal history doesn’t simply emerge as something we read between the lines; it takes center stage. Cincinnati is largely (though not exclusively) a German American town: German Catholics, German Lutherans, German Jews. “To Jewishness” reminds us that not every Cincinnati’s “German” experience was the same. The tensions between these religious communities were especially pronounced in the 1930s and ’40s during a worldwide wave of anti-Semitism. Koch was faced with the dilemma many minority teenagers confront: if one of these allegiances is hostile to the other, to whom do I belong?

In fact, Koch expresses ambivalence about the two cultures—Jewish and American—essential to his outlook. The speaker of “To Jewishness” (presumably Koch himself) is drawn to what is, for him, off-limits. Jewishness “kept me out of the Harvard clubs,” but

Blonde

Hair, blue eyes,
And Christianity (oddly enough) had an
Aphrodisiac effect on me.

Still, he acknowledges that Judaism gave

ceremony

To everyday things, surprise and
Symbolism and things beyond
Understanding.

He even claims his ethnicity saved him “from the flatness of my life.”

I relate to Koch’s complicated relationship with his religious heritage. I experienced firsthand the parochialism of the Lutheran community that schooled and catechized me. I didn’t always know who I was; to wear my religion in public put me at odds with the secular neighborhoods that also were my home. I appreciated the spiritual dimension that Christian faith opened in me, and the cadences of the Scriptures would become second nature in my writing, but indoctrination didn’t encourage freewheeling self-expression or spouting off.

And like Koch, I suffocated in the suburbs. Cincinnati, by the ’70s, had become overrun with asphalt and concrete. The incursion of restaurant chains and strip malls, soon to be followed by big-box stores, awakened a desire in me to purchase everything in sight. If I wanted to be more than a consumer, I would

have to be cast out, I would have to track down pockets of writers and readers in urban centers where I could cultivate the intellectual and creative life. I also would have to find a vernacular with which to express my dis-ease.

I knew none of this at the time. I was concocting a boyish version of Cincinnati. It's a version I've come to love and have never gotten over. When I come back to the city, as I often do, I rehearse the past. True, I can't relive the thrills of running to buy an ice cream cone from the Mister Softee truck on Trillium Court or sledding down the giant hill in French Park. But I do try to walk the river and see a Reds game and eat coney's at Skyline Chili.

This last visit, I rolled through Koch's old neighborhood, Avondale, once home also to Steven Spielberg, who lived there the first four years of his life, 1946–1950, and home to who knows how many other dreamers. I only vaguely knew of another history of Avondale, where in the 1940s Black residents from the West End began to populate the neighborhood after being displaced by the construction of the Mill Creek Expressway. Nor did I understand the growing tensions as the village divided and the poorer residents settled into South Avondale, where they endured rising unemployment, crime sprees, police harassment, price gouging of goods and services, and rental units in disrepair—injustices that culminated in the race riots of 1967 and 1968. No. While the National Guard was patrolling the streets with machine guns and quelling unrest, I was up the road starting kindergarten at a Lutheran school in Silverton. I have no idea what my teachers were thinking at that time, but they had to be shaken. Meanwhile, unaware of the violence, five-year-old me was happily making popsicle-stick art and learning his letters.

Silverton, by all accounts, was becoming successfully integrated, spurred by the efforts of the neighborhood association and similar organizations that encouraged dialogue between Blacks and whites. The Lutheran school there was reaching out to the surrounding areas and recruiting Black students. They became my classmates. I can't say with confidence that our experience at Our Redeemer was without conflicts. How could it have been? But we were mutually enriched, part of a social experiment ongoing in schools throughout the US.

As I have made my journey in poetry, I have reacted against the cringey aspects of my own suburban background and tried to believe that somehow the quixotic '60s have seeped into my art. I have followed Kenneth Koch and his ilk (Wallace Stevens, Frank O'Hara, John Berryman, Allen Ginsberg, James Tate) into a comic surrealism. I needed such a tribe of lighthearted revolutionaries if I was ever going to explode onto the scene like they did and say new.

As American readers have turned toward political poems, however, I've had to reconsider the poetics I inherited, whose language—cordoned off from the world—insists on remaining potently, and probably naively, self-contained. I've been confronted with the fact that homogenized writers of my generation, when recalling their hometowns, are liable to leave out other perspectives, thus artificially whitening the neighborhoods they thought they understood so well. Poet-activist Nikki Giovanni, raised in Lincoln Heights and instrumental in establishing Cincinnati's first Black Arts Festival in 1967, offers a welcome corrective:

childhood remembrances are always a drag
if you're Black
you always remember things like living in Woodlawn
with no inside toilet
and if you become famous or something
they never talk about how happy you were to have
your mother
all to yourself . . .
and I really hope no white person ever has cause
to write about me
because they never understand
Black love is Black wealth and they'll
probably talk about my hard childhood
and never understand that
all the while I was quite happy ("Nikki-Rosa")

What I'm saying is that it's not just my pseudo-parent Kenneth Koch to whom I owe a literary debt; there are whole neighborhoods of Cincinnati poetry I am only now, decades into my career, probing. And in exploring these cul-de-sacs, I am coming to apprehend in detail the contradictions of the town that birthed me. My birthplace, like my origin story, I go on vigilantly revising. Along with Koch,

To Cincinnati, though, I feel compelled,
To start my canto, since a sort of promise
Was made . . . (*Ko, or a Season on Earth*, Canto IV)

Writing Therapy: Spoken Word in the Corporate World

At nine years old, I was forced into my room with a journal and pen after an attempted sexual assault by three of my neighbor's much older sons and after inappropriate gazes and behavior from a family member. Even years later, as an adult, I had tears in my eyes as I wrote the poem "My Near Miss," which is included in my book *Equals Greatness*. I tapped back into the hurt of that moment: "I've been told to talk. To tell if anyone has touched me, but how do I explain this feeling of violation, that tore holes in my flesh without penetration." Slowly but surely, writing started to become therapeutic. It was a constant friend, especially during the most crushing times of my life. When I escaped domestic violence, I wrote, "My mind had been taken apart like small puzzle pieces. It lingered around hoping someone could unscramble the mess and reveal the true picture from the varied pieces of memories."

My "true picture" ended up propelling me into mental-health advocacy, domestic violence prevention, motivational speaking, and empowering others. I began to design programming, including "The Progression of Violence" and "Thriving After Survival" workshops taught at Northern Kentucky University, University of Cincinnati, University of Detroit Mercy, Youngstown University, and Ohio University. In October 2021, a social-media post of my poem "PTSD," which describes how post-traumatic stress disorder caused by domestic violence is viewed differently from PTSD experienced by veterans, received national attention. It led to a core team of other mental-health advocates and spoken-word artists—Tracy "T-Spirit" Stanton (St. Louis), Tonyela "MasterPiece" Arphul (Dallas), Ed Mabrey (Los Angeles), and I—teaming up yearly to curate the Regal Rhythms Poetry Survivors Ball here in Cincinnati. With the help of our sponsors (the Mayerson Foundation, Tristate Trauma Network, Women Helping Women, Recovery Center of Hamilton County,

Northern Kentucky University, and Women Writing for (a) Change), this ball, an open mic for trauma survivors, and six workshops help people learn the power of sharing their survivor stories. For me, writing as therapy happens in the Cincinnati area for so many kinds of people and in so many settings: young adults in recovery centers, women finding their voices, exonerees, and even corporate workers.

As I continued to use writing therapy in my own work as cofounder of Regal Rhythms Poetry and founder of Hit the Mic Cincy, I began to connect with and be inspired by others who valued the power of writing and used it in their places of work, especially Amanda Stoddard and Donna Mayerson. Stoddard, of the Recovery Center of Hamilton County, says that her love for the arts began with music, because “growing up, there was a lot of emotional dysfunction around me.” Her love for words was rewarded when she won second place for her Martin Luther King Jr. poem about equality in the fourth grade. She would later use a combination of rapping and poetry to open her first open-mic night in her freshman year of college. She says, “Writing was the one thing that constantly helped me regulate. . . . Without those tools and writing, I don’t necessarily think I’d be here having this conversation with you.” As she moved to her position with the Recovery Center of Hamilton County, she noticed that they already had creative-writing classes. However, Amanda was the first to introduce writing therapy to a very underserved population known as transitional youth, those who are eighteen to thirty years old, and who are rarely given programming services. In 2019 she started a Writing for Healing Workshop with Katarina Knehans for these youth, known as RC After Dark. Now Stoddard is a certified peer-recovery supporter and trainer through the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, and certified in trauma-responsive care through Tristate Trauma Network.

Amanda’s true gift is what she refers to as “curating prompts to evoke emotion.” Her writing prompts go beyond the surface level of your emotions to reach the real issues that need to be discussed and disclosed. In an article in the *British Journal of General Practice*, Soul Mugerwa and John Holden point out that “disclosure in the form of the spoken word has long been considered beneficial and widely used in counseling and other therapies.” Writing therapy improves your physical health, boosts your immune system, and helps employees have fewer missed days due to illness. Mugerwa and Holden also say that writing helps you cope with and process traumatic events, because “writing may facilitate cognitive processing of traumatic memories, resulting

in more adaptive, integrated representations about the writer themselves, their world, and others.” For example, I was able to face my life much better after I attended RC After Dark. I am a witness that you feel the warmth and connection as soon as you step into the room. I had been involved with several writing communities, but I found myself releasing onto the page like never before while I was there. It wasn’t until I elected to share my writing with the group that I understood the full impact of my emotions. It was so surreal, like reading someone else’s words, but they helped me face my deepest thoughts and feelings.

Amanda says many people have felt better after the writing circles; they said they felt lighter, had more clarity, and were more positive about what they were dealing with. Writing therapy helped in her personal life to regulate her emotions, deal with past traumatic events, and cope with her physical battles with endometriosis. Amanda also described the regulation process and how writing takes you from having an emotional and physical stress response, with increased heart rate, uneasiness, and anxiety, to a much calmer place with a lower heart rate and a sense of being more grounded. She says, “Writing helps over time by taking those traumatic memories from the limbic system known as the fear center into the processing brain known as the prefrontal cortex.” Those words alone were empowering for me because I began to see writing as a rerouting tool.

Experiencing writing therapy impacted me not only while I was at RC After Dark: there are lasting effects that I still carry to this day. In fact, I now wholeheartedly agree with Amanda Stoddard’s observation that “writing has been something that fundamentally changed the trajectory of my life.” I learned to lean heavily upon it to find my voice, and it equipped me with the power of expression. Most importantly, it taught me how it felt to be held within a safe space, to express myself and be vulnerable. As a result, within a year, I had taken a leap to become a certified writing-group facilitator through Women Writing for (a) Change, because I wanted to create a safe space for people in that same way. This journey led me to Dr. Donna Mayerson.

Mayerson is a trustee of the Mayerson Foundation and the clinical director of the Ohio Innocence Project. I first started working with the OIP when I began facilitating writing groups. Mayerson, a licensed psychologist in the state of Ohio, sat with me during writing groups with exonerees and their families, sharing as a participant and giving valuable feedback after the writing circles. Although I was still trying to find my way as a new facilitator,

to develop my own style and learn to be moved by my own intuitions and faith, she spoke frequently about the “magic” that was occurring during the writing circles. The practices I learned at WWf(a)C focus on the emotions experienced. Those writing are encouraged to ignore grammar, spelling, and sentence structure. You are to avoid your inner critic; instead, you are taught to focus on getting something on the page. This allows you to be more transparent and free to express yourself, which can increase your ability to communicate with others as well as find a safe outlet to reduce stress. I realized that writing therapy would be very useful even for corporations wanting better interactions between staff and to improve the overall work experience.

After speaking with Dr. Mayerson further, I discovered that over the previous five years, she was responsible for introducing art therapy to the Ohio Innocence Project’s work with exonerees and their families. Many who were wrongfully convicted and later released didn’t trust traditional, clinical therapies because walking into an office to talk about their experiences was uncomfortable. Mayerson says, “Artistic, creative expression can be very curative, particularly when there is a focus on resilience.” Donna has used various types of arts therapy including music, with the organizations Songwriting with Soldiers and Alive Inside, and she has encouraged several of the exonerees to use art as their form of expression. She says that after I introduced writing therapy into the OIP through poetry group facilitation, “they still say to this day it opened up something in them.”

Over the last four years, I have connected with companies that wanted to have a commissioned piece written about their company mottos and mission statements, to display on their walls and encourage their staff. I’ve been called into webinars and meetings to provide spoken word. I have performed and facilitated writing during breakout sessions for mental health organizations like Tristate Trauma Network and Mental Health America. As I facilitate, I see their tears, much like my own when I was a participant for the first time. I remember the words of Donna Mayerson, that this work is curative when the focus is on resilience, so I allow that to be a guiding force. I learned to intentionally stay after a session to hear the private stories and give and receive one-on-one feedback. Many share about the people they lost during the pandemic, and the struggles they face at home and at work, how hard it is to prioritize their self-care, find work/life balance, and reduce stress, and they say they feel much better after writing. The raw emotion shown in their work always leaves me still thinking about them as I drive home. Weeks, months, and now years

later, I hope they still carry the inspiration, strength, and courage they found by being prompted to write and encouraged to share their writing. Writing therapy has led me to continue to expand the mission for my company Regal Rhythms Poetry LLC. We are now “connecting artists to opportunities” and curating spoken-word events for corporations, schools, and organizations. Within the last five weeks, we have referred and/or curated spoken-word and teaching-artist positions for almost fifty artists, and the calls are still pouring in. Spoken word can transform the corporate world and has been making its mark within Cincinnati and the surrounding areas as an integral component to healing and promoting better physical and mental outcomes.

NATALIE VILLACORTA

Stories Worth Telling

Recently a friend invited my husband and me to meet someone thinking about moving to Cincinnati. “These are the people I was telling you about who love Cincinnati,” my friend said by way of introducing us. My husband and I have developed a reputation in the University of Cincinnati’s creative writing PhD program for being East Coast transplants who love the area. How did it happen that we love this city so much, likely more than many of our classmates, most of whom moved away after the third year in our program and finished remotely?

I credit our love partially to WordPlay Cincy, a nonprofit focused on helping children find and express their voices through storytelling in many forms: writing, performance, and visual art. I started teaching workshops at WordPlay shortly after moving to Cincinnati because I was looking for a way to take creative writing outside of the college classroom, to work with young people who historically don’t have access to such programs. Having taught before, I expected to find the teaching rewarding, but what I didn’t expect was how being a teaching artist for WordPlay—through the practices I developed in my teaching, the neighborhoods it took me to, and the people I met—would help me with my own writing and contribute to making Cincinnati not just a place where I lived but also a place I felt connected to.

When I started my PhD at UC in the fall of 2018, I was hugely intimidated by my peers and professors. Though I had written only a handful of short stories (my MFA was in creative nonfiction), I was taking a novel-writing workshop with people who had published fiction in esteemed literary magazines and had completed full novel manuscripts. I could not help but compare myself to these peers and feel that I didn’t deserve to be there. My self-doubt made it hard to write. I was up for workshop just once the first semester and only a few times in subsequent semesters, so the stakes felt incredibly high. When it came time to share my work, my heartbeat raced. I kept my arms close to my

sides to hide my boggy armpits. As the rest of the class discussed my work, all I could hear was what was wrong with my writing, that I was a bad writer.

The writing environment at WordPlay was a welcome alternative. I started out as a volunteer, assisting a teaching artist named Jenny who was an English teacher at Mason High School; she taught a class called “My Story, My Voice” for nine-to-twelve-year-olds. Every Saturday morning, exhausted from the week, sometimes having been out drinking the night before, a small part of me wanted to stay in bed and keep sleeping. But the desire to participate in Jenny’s class was stronger, and I would scramble out of bed, throw on some clothes, and race over to WordPlay’s Northside headquarters. Each week, we read a poem or short story in which the writer thought through some aspect of their identity: “My First Memory (of Librarians)” by Nikki Giovanni, “Shootaround” by Jacob Saenz, “Eleven” by Sandra Cisneros. Then we wrote a piece inspired by that work, and those who were willing shared their writing. Afterward, the group offered “Golden Lines”—words or phrases that struck us as particularly strong. It felt good to write to prompts, to write in a low-stakes way. It felt good to write something and immediately share it and get feedback—even if it was from a bunch of kids. I was inspired by the students, how they started writing without hesitation, how they often were keen to share, unhampered by self-doubt. Writing didn’t always have to be hard and self-esteem shattering; it could also be fun and uplifting.

The next fall, a few months after I moved to the Northside neighborhood myself, I took over the class for Jenny. After the poet Ross Gay came to town for the University of Cincinnati’s reading series, I taught the title poem in *Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015) to my WordPlay students. We read the poem aloud and then noticed what Gay notices: A barefoot baby tamping down the soil over a newly planted apple tree in a community orchard. The “flocking / of men” who help an old lady “falling down / on the corner of Fairmount and 18th.” The barefoot woman who stops her car in the middle of the road to rescue a crossing turtle. Not *flowers*, but *hyacinth* and *crocuses* and *zinnias* and *false indigo*. Then, clipboards in hand, we went for a walk, heading down Hamilton Avenue, looking for things that filled *us* with gratitude. Toby noticed the fluffy white clouds, Owen noticed how sad Hoffner Park looked when the farmers market wasn’t on, and Salaam noticed a Michael Jackson T-shirt on the wall of Shake It Records: MJ in a tux, leaning back against a brick wall: the *Off the Wall* album cover art.

I noticed a brick house with a peach tree in the front yard, branches stretch-

ing out over the chain-link fence, dipping down to the sidewalk. A woman with curly red hair was sweeping the front porch. When I asked if it was okay for us to admire her garden, she offered us some peaches. She brought a wooden bushel basket to the sidewalk, and at first I balked—*Don't take food from strangers!*—but I realized this woman wasn't a stranger, she was a neighbor, and we all reached in. The peaches were small and yellow but blushing red. "What do they smell like?" I asked the kids.

"Sweet!" they said.

"How do they feel?"

"Furry!" "Fuzzy!" Little lint balls on their skin.

I thought, *Ross Gay would love this shit*. I don't know if I'd read it at the time, but in "To the Fig Tree on 9th and Christian," Gay describes a similar experience, except with a fig tree in Philadelphia.

"What's your name?" I called out to the peach lady.

"Ginger!" she said. Of course, I thought, she was a redhead! Ginger asked mine, and I told her, and the kids and I headed back, noticing still other things: blue splatter on a brick wall and sidewalk ("It looks like someone threw blueberries!"), how the air outside the pizza place smelled like burnt bread. Back at our desks, we wrote our own catalogs of gratitude and shared them. I left the class feeling so joyful: "It is good to stop and look and say thank you. . . . Today WordPlay was delightful because I want to see kids excited, engaged," I wrote in my journal.

I took this noticing exercise beyond the class, making a practice of noticing every time I left my house for a walk—which I did increasingly during the pandemic—and I found so much to love about my neighborhood and Cincinnati at large. Outside a house on Cherry Street, there was a basket of snacks for delivery workers—chips and Chewy bars and sleeves of nuts. On the steps to the Northside public library, beside a water bowl for dogs, a sign: "Take a stick, leave a stick" and a pile of sticks. Spray-painted on the sidewalk in front of a house on Bruce Avenue: a red circle and the words DANCE SPOT. I danced. On one of these walks, I got the idea to write a story that took place over the course of a walk; the story poured out of me, and later, after many revisions, I published it.

Noticing gave me so much joy that I wanted to share this superpower with others. The next time I held a "Noticing Northside" workshop at WordPlay, I made copies of my students' catalogs of gratitude, slipped them into plastic sleeves, and tacked them to telephone poles around Northside, hoping that

others would be inspired and start their own noticing practices. “Wonder is always around. Just waiting to be found. So next time you’re around / Just listen for sounds and you’ll find something new,” wrote Desi, age eleven. “i wonder wats in this tiny berry so i will put it the grass so it will grow more tiny berrys,” wrote Nellie, age eight.

While my work for WordPlay helped me to see and appreciate my neighborhood, it also helped me to see and appreciate other parts of the city. In the spring of 2020, a woman named Clarity who worked for the Cincinnati Public Library volunteered with my class. When people started protesting police brutality a few months later—after the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor—thanks to Clarity’s Facebook posts, I was informed about where the protests were happening, what bail funds I could donate to for protesters who had been arrested, and the city’s history of police violence. When I saw Clarity at protests, I felt a coherence to my life. The same feeling occurred when Zee, whom I first knew through WordPlay, ended up in my creative nonfiction class at UC, and when Jacob, who was in my podcasting and audio storytelling class at UC, ended up volunteering for WordPlay, and when Carolyn, a Xavier University student who volunteered at WordPlay, appeared in a class I taught at Xavier. WordPlay brought together writers from different corners of the city who might not otherwise have connected.

As much as I loved teaching in my own neighborhood (and as much as it was convenient), I knew what I really wanted to do was get outside my community, go into the Cincinnati Public Schools to bring creative writing to kids who couldn’t get to WordPlay or kids who didn’t yet know they liked creative writing. In the spring of 2021, I signed up to teach high school freshmen at Oyler School in Price Hill, or “the P,” as my students called it. My plan was to have my students write personal stories in the style of *The Moth* and perform their stories for an audience of peers and teachers. I’d done a similar workshop at WordPlay’s headquarters, and it had gone well.

But my Oyler class did not start as smoothly. The students didn’t have much to say about the sample stories I showed them. When we turned to writing and I handed out the prompts (*Tell a story about a time you did something you never thought you’d do; a time your relationship with someone you love changed; a time that you took a risk—or decided NOT to take the risk*), many of them hardly wrote a word. They said they had no ideas. What was going on?

I was used to teaching affluent white kids who were eager to write and to share their work with each other. But the Oyler students were largely Black and

Latinx, working-class and poor. Their experiences as people of color had made them reluctant to write and share their stories. As Felicia Rose Chavez writes in *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Classroom* (Haymarket Books, 2021), “When people of color receive an invitation to write, to exercise voice in public space, naturally we’re wary. Our lives are an exercise in repression—the everyday denial of voice—so as to safeguard our bodies.”

I realized I had to change my plan. Instead of asking students to start writing right away, I first talked through ideas with them. I found that they did have plenty of stories, but they didn’t think theirs were experiences worth telling. Who cared that they had once gotten into a fight at Washington Park? Who cared that their grandma had died? Who cared that their mother was sick? I cared! Once I assured them these were great ideas, they started talking, and it was hard to get them to stop.

But when I asked them to write the stories down, they dragged their feet. The phones came out. I decided to throw out the writing part. Instead of workshopping written pieces, we workshopped oral performances. They balked at performing for an audience of their peers and recording these performances. Some explained they were afraid they would get in trouble. I lowered the stakes: We would just tell them to each other and a select staff person or two. No cameras, no mics, if they didn’t want them. And they could sit down if they preferred.

When, after weeks of coaxing and Domino’s and making a fool of myself dancing to Cardi B, they finally opened up and shared their stories—about being bullied by an older girl, about their best friend moving away, about losing their grandma who raised them, about getting into fights with other girls and getting kicked out of school—I was deeply moved. I realized later that I saw myself in these students: a lack of confidence, a fear that my story wasn’t important or worth telling. I realized that these issues were getting in the way of important stories being told, and that I was in a position to help students gain confidence and affirm the value of their stories. This is the special role of organizations like WordPlay: You can learn the techniques and craft of creative writing in many places, but if you do not believe that you are capable and that people want to hear your story, that your story deserves to be told and has power, these skills don’t matter. WordPlay enables kids (and adults) to find joy in writing, to build confidence, and to find community—all of which are essential to the creation of literature but which writers at higher levels and in academia can sometimes forget.