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## Finding and Filling the Inkwell: Gathering, Cultivating and Writing in an Intersectional Feminist Scholarly Community

Danika Medak-Saltzman  
*Syracuse University*, [dfmedaks@syr.edu](mailto:dfmedaks@syr.edu)

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### Abstract

The author describes feminist writing collectivities inspired by Michelle Boyd's *InkWell* Academic Writing Retreats. The collectivities are an example of feminist placemaking where members relish each other's career or personal wins, and triage writing roadblocks, all while nurturing and reinforcing individual writing endeavors and sustaining writing practices.

### Keywords

Writing Groups, Women of Color

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Syracuse University

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During the second COVID summer, otherwise known as 2021, I managed to secure funding to attend a week-long online version of "Composed", Michelle Boyd's signature offering through *InkWell Academic Writing Retreats*.<sup>1</sup> As I have been telling anyone who will listen ever since, this experience, quite literally, changed my life, and my relationship with writing. Through *InkWell* I found a generous, deeply knowledgeable, incisive, and effective writing coach, and also gained access to an incredible community of fellow academics familiar with Boyd's methods—some of whom have since formed small ongoing and/or occasional writing collectivities where we can implement learned strategies and foster supportive, confidential, and generative writing sessions. Before I provide more detail about *InkWell*, and the instantiation of feminist placemaking it has made possible in my life, let alone how Boyd's methods have also fostered the cultivation of other unique feminist writing

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<sup>1</sup> The *Inkwell* website offers a sample request letter and provides suggestions about how one might solicit (even partial) funding ([inkwellretreats.org/fund-your-retreat.html](http://inkwellretreats.org/fund-your-retreat.html)).

communities, I want to draw the reader's attention to the InkWell website ([inkwellretreats.org](http://inkwellretreats.org)). There the reader can find the first chapter of Boyd's book *Becoming the Writer You Already Are*<sup>2</sup> as a free download. The site also provides a link to purchase the book at a discounted rate, should the reader wish to do so. In this way, the *InkWell* website signals a deep understanding that individual access to personal and professional resources and funding are not the same by providing readers with the means for a first (or continued) encounter with Boyd's style via *Becoming* that is also more cost effective and accessible than a writing retreat might be. In short, *Becoming* presents a comprehensive introduction to Boyd's approach, while demonstrating that her methods are grounded in scholarship on writing and draw on a rich array of material on "best practices" for fostering academic productivity.<sup>3</sup>

Since attending "Composed", I rarely<sup>4</sup> rely on the binge-writing practices that saw me through grad school, a dissertation, and book manuscript drafts. While such intensive sprints may sometimes be necessary in facilitating project completion or the meeting of editorial deadlines, using them as a principle writing strategy always came at an inevitable price for me: leaving me depleted, demoralized, detached from the enjoyable parts of writing, and desperate to find an alternative to this primary writing process. I now write, near-daily, most often "in community" on zoom, primarily with other "Composed" alums from various social locations, time zones, and disciplines, who attend on a drop-in basis as time and schedules allow.<sup>5</sup> Our group, whom I fondly

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<sup>2</sup> A free copy of the first chapter of *Becoming* is available as a download (and it comes with a 30% off coupon code for those interested in reading more) on the website [inkwellretreats.org/becoming.html](http://inkwellretreats.org/becoming.html)

<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Boyd periodically offers free workshops that are accessible to those who do not have the personal or institutional resources for a full retreat.

<sup>4</sup> I do not say "never" here because like other unhealthy behaviors acquired in the face of challenges, successfully managing bingeing behaviors requires intentional effort, a commitment to practice, accountability, and support—it is an ongoing process, one that has become routinely successful in my life thanks in no small part to space the online feminist community of writers InkWell has encouraged me to cultivate.

<sup>5</sup> When my regular writing partners are unavailable, I turn to web accessible tools like [focusmate.com](http://focusmate.com) which provide virtual co-working spaces. While some might be turned off by the idea of working with a literal stranger, neurodivergent writers often find that such opportunities for "body doubling" to be effective means of facilitating task initiation and completion. Focusmate, for example, pairs co-working partners, based on the time frame selected, from around the globe. It also allows you to "favorite" co-working partners that you

call the “InkWellians” is made up of U.S.-based humanities scholars, broadly speaking, and includes two Black women, an Indigenous woman (myself)<sup>6</sup>, a South Asian woman and three white women accomplices.<sup>7</sup> Together, with each convening, we co-create a feminist gathering space where our individual writing endeavors are undertaken as part of a confidential, community building, and accountability project.

Rather than being anomalous, our small community of InkWellians represents a key aspect of Boyd’s vision for participants. Boyd explicitly encourages alums to seek each other out for continued support, to serve as resources to one another as we continue implementing and reinforcing InkWell strategies collectively, and foster a sustaining writing practice, alone, together—mirroring the way that *InkWell* retreats and workshops cultivate environments and modes of engagement with, and among, participants that are grounded in intersectional feminist approaches that encourage us to come to our writing as whole people, not simply as our academic selves. This can mean recognizing, naming or bearing in mind/ bearing witness to the ways that our social locations impact us and the projects we undertake to varying degrees. In contrast to the way that (white) cisgendered, ableist, hetero-patriarchal systems require a particular kind of disassociation that mandates a cleaving of the intellectual self from emotional and embodied experiences affecting our wellbeing and, therefore, also our academic work, in order to be considered objective, professional, and/or scholarly, Boyd reminds her participants that the personal is political, that silence will not protect us, and that, whether we are willing to admit it or not, writing can be an emotional, political, layered and taxing process for many of us for any number of reasons. In this way Boyd models for her participants how one can create shared collective space, even virtually, where the complicated emotionality of the writing process can be addressed—a topic largely unacknowledged and unaddressed in academe. To be clear, this does *not* mean creating a space for therapy, or for providing

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would like to work with again, or who you may know IRL, and will prioritize such matches, when they are available. Notably, focusmate.com allots users five free sessions each month, so it can be tried risk-free, or utilized without cost, a few times a month.

<sup>6</sup> I am a first-generation descendant Turtle Mountain Chippewa woman, with roots in Red River as well as in French, Slavic, Spanish, and Jewish cultures.

<sup>7</sup> Indigenous Action Media. “Accomplices not Allies: Abolishing the Ally Industrial Complex: An Indigenous Perspective and Provocation.” May 2, 2014. [indigenouaction.org/wp-content/uploads/Accomplices-Not-Allies-print.pdf](https://indigenouaction.org/wp-content/uploads/Accomplices-Not-Allies-print.pdf) Accessed June 11, 2024; Michelle Mijung Kim. “Allyship (& Accomplice): The What, Why, and How”. [medium.com/awaken-blog/allyship-vs-accomplice-the-what-why-and-how-f3da767d48cc](https://medium.com/awaken-blog/allyship-vs-accomplice-the-what-why-and-how-f3da767d48cc) Accessed June 11, 2024.

one another with unsolicited advice. Instead, what Boyd teaches are techniques to stave-off, overcome, or push through the (sometimes emotionally charged) blocks to writing that can manifest unexpectedly (or even expectedly) during a given writing session.

It took a few times of me hearing Boyd mention that *InkWell*-like environments can be, and have been, co-created elsewhere, before I understood this as a call to action—a way to carry the work forward and honor the feminist praxis and pedagogy that are the heart of *InkWell*. With Boyd's blessing and encouragement, members of multiple *InkWell* retreat and workshop sessions continue to reach out to one another in efforts to form such small feminist writing collectivities. This was particularly important during the mid-covid moment when I was first exposed to Boyd and *InkWell*. Although, in my case, manifesting a sustained *InkWell*-informed writing community took time, persistence eventually paid off and our group of "Inkwellians" began to coalesce.

The intersectional intellectual feminist gathering space we create as "Inkwellians" stands in stark contrast to the oft championed image of the isolated ivory tower intellectual—emblematic of academic productivity and success, yet whose accomplishments are rendered possible because of access to significant and usually uncompensated, unacknowledged, and invisible labor (and/or access to financial resources that make outsourcing such labor feasible). Akin to an academic version of rugged (cisgendered heterosexual masculinist) individualism, this fabled intellectual worker also exists amid a mythos of erasure that obscures the human, temporal, and environmental costs of projects that, at their core, are rooted in, utilized by, and ultimately rely on the very entrenched and interlocking systems of oppression that intersectional feminism insists be recognized and dismantled. In contrast with the celebrated isolated neoliberal employee in academe, our Inkwellian co-working sessions manifest as a place where we can engage as a community who are invested in each other's successes, recognize that there may be any number of life issues that can impact our daily ability to show up for ourselves, and we manage to show up for one another even when we struggle to do so for ourselves. Working in such an environment has become my preferred way to write, in part because it facilitates a space where a specific group can better hold themselves individually and each other collectively accountable to the time we have committed to writing. There is something about looking up from your document to see your fellow writers on the zoom screen who are also toiling away—it is at once inspiring, motivating, and grounding.

To be clear, working together-apart, in this way, still allows for, requires, and values the alone-time where our projects take shape and develop. Part of the utility of zoom for working is that one can notice, either via the screen or in the chat, when another has stepped away from their work for longer than a short break—which might then, on occasion, prompt questions about things that came up during our allotted writing time during “checkout”, but I am getting ahead of myself.

Although what *InkWell* offers has been profoundly helpful to me and for many alums, it is not a one size fits all program. While multiple other writing support options exist, for those among us who find that the feelings that their writing brings to the surface (whether related to content, subject matter, the alleged “imposter syndrome”, or something else entirely) are getting in the way of writing, there is *InkWell*. Boyd’s system is not a new way or method of writing, per se. Instead, and on some level, it is a reminder that somewhere along the way many of us stopped trusting our abilities—or, more likely, our faith in ourselves. Our abilities have been slowly eroded by the elitist, ableist, and exclusionary culture of the academy. *InkWell* programs, on the other hand, encourage a reckoning with this reality by reminding us that we already *have* effective writing processes we can trust—after all, it is no accident we have gotten this far!

While my Inkwellican collectivity may have begun as an attempt, at least initially, to mediate the all-encompassing social isolation that COVID imposed, it has become so much more. From inception to now, my Inkwellicans and I have continued to zoom-gather, to write in community and in feminist solidarity, despite semester- or summer-based schedule changes or fluctuations in our individual lives that might require additional and unexpected attention. Our membership reflects those who tend to be drawn to *InkWell*: scholars—primarily BIPOC, and women academics who, like other underrepresented and marginalized faculty at HWCU (historically white colleges and universities) across the United States, are often isolated, or are one of few in their departments and/or on their respective campuses. As such, our gatherings are also an important space for holding space for one another and sharing (briefly!) some of the frustrations and challenges that go unspoken in our day-to-day academic lives. We begin our writing sessions with *brief* check-ins (we stress brevity to respect one another’s time and because it is *not* therapy), where we acknowledge how it has been going, what we plan to work on, and/or what is, or might be, standing in our way, and whether, on that given day, we are looking for “help, a (metaphorical) hug, or simply

to be heard". Sometimes this leads to opportunities to share what has worked for one of us in the past, or to remind one another to "separate the situation from the story" or that "no to them is yes to you." My personal favorite occasion is when one of us (who is particularly gifted in doing so) says "as Michelle would say..." before gesturing to an *InkWell* strategy particularly well-suited to the issue-at-hand. After that, we write (with mics muted): together, apart. Then, a few minutes before the scheduled end of our writing session (at a prearranged time), we check-out—reflecting on and sharing how our writing session went and giving voice to at least one good thing that happened (negativity bias is real!) which allows for us to leave with at least some small measure of accomplishment, even during particularly grueling moments.

These co-writing sessions are energizing and encouraging because we hold ourselves and one another to account. It is a community investment in our work and in each other's processes that is, in and of itself, sustaining and feminist: we find joy in one another's successes (no matter how minor), and find a renewed sense of trust in our processes and in a faith that grows from the collective satisfaction of hearing how writing happened despite trials faced along the way. On occasion, we provide each other with confidential support, harnessing the power of our hivemind to strategize, commiserate, and root for each other—enacting a different academy in the process. I am heartened knowing that ours is but one manifestation of *Inkwell* inspired gatherings—free feminist writing collectivities where we relish each other's career or personal wins, and triage writing roadblocks, all while nurturing and reinforcing mutually beneficial, sustained, and sustaining writing practices. Here's to gathering, together, apart—and, as my Inkwellians say, happy writing!



Danika Medak-Saltzman, PhD

Assistant Professor of Women's and Gender Studies  
Syracuse University

Danika Medak-Saltzman is assistant professor of Women's and Gender Studies, and faculty affiliate of the Native American and Indigenous Studies Program and the Center for Global Indigenous Cultures and Environmental Justice at Syracuse University. Her work focuses on what she calls "inter-imperial intimacies" and centers around American Studies, pop culture,



Indigenous studies, feminist futures, disability studies, transnational Indigeneity, comparative settler-colonialisms, as well as media and visual cultural studies. Her current book project examines the transnational movement of American colonial policies—particularly in the case of Japan. She has published widely, placing articles in *American Quarterly*, *The Journal of Critical Ethnic Studies*, *Studies in American Indian Literature*, *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, *Critical Asian Studies*, and most recently *Feminist Formations*. Alongside Lyko Day of Mount Holyoke College, Antonio T. Tiongson, Jr. of Syracuse University, and Shanté Paradigm Smalls of St. John's University, Medak-Saltzman is co-editor of the *Critical Race, Indigeneity and Relationality* book series for Temple University Press.