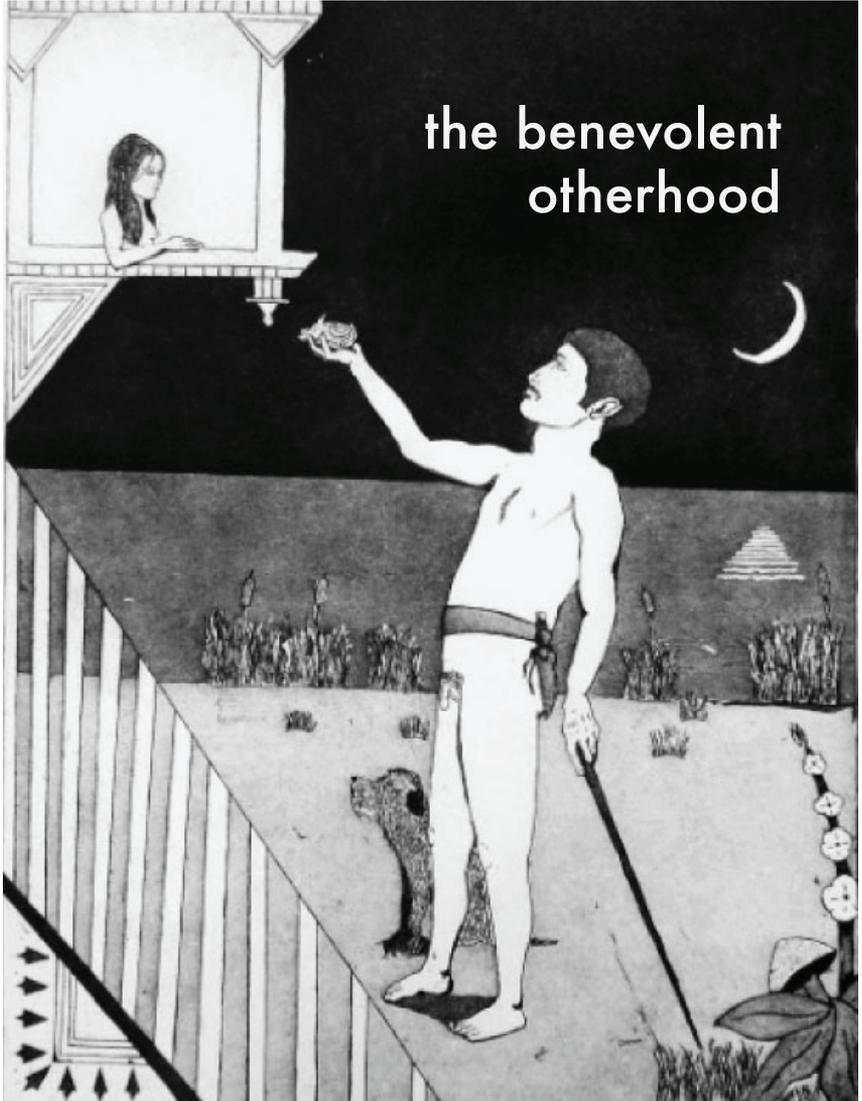


the benevolent  
otherhood



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## What I Hear When My Students Write About Sex, Drugs, and Hip Hop

For most of the seniors in my Poetry course, it is their first time taking a creative-writing course. While they have written love poems during Algebra or scribbled lyrics in black and white composition books, this is the first writing they will do for a class not to present information, to persuade, to compare and contrast, to expound about a literary theme, but to express.

The line between poems written in a personal journal and those that are acceptable to submit for a grade becomes blurry in a high school creative writing class. During the first week of the semester, with timidity, a handful of poets make small confessions of first kisses, smoking cigarettes in the baseball field, and sneaking out for a late night party. Many of the students invariably whip their heads around to look for my stunned reaction; however, they witness me only calmly nod and blandly smile at these first indiscretions. Being a writer myself, I cannot and do not wish to censor their first toe dips into creative writing.

In the coming weeks, however, their boldness increases. They read pieces about their cousin JR who was arrested while dealing pot in the Sears' parking lot. Or they read aloud poems fraught with bawdy complaints about "bi-otchs and hos." Or they punctuate each of their lines with creative variations on the f-word. As they are reading, my temperature rises and my palms sweat. It is a reaction reminiscent of the time I failed to fast-forward through the full frontal nudity in the film version of *Like Water for Chocolate* or forgot about a rather chaste and passionless sex scene between two clones in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (a passage that a student showed her mother who subsequently showed the school administration).

But my heatedness arises not so much from a fear of reprimand by my administrators, or that I am particularly shocked by the sex, drugs, and hip hop presented in their poems. Rather, it is, I suppose, my irritation at their lazy trafficking in taboo subject matter. These

students wish to impress the class with their badness and it is roundly expected that I, the teacher, should react in an authoritative and restrictive manner.

And I do react.

Sometimes, I react with my mediocre Ricky Ricardo imitation in which I slap my cheek and say, “Aye yi yi!” while throwing a maudlin gaze up at the Styrofoam ceiling of my portable classroom. Other times, I plug my ears with both fingers, open my eyes wide, and singsong loudly, “La la la” in a theatrical show of don’t-ask-don’t-tell. It’s my comedic routine, a means of addressing the offensiveness of the language without shutting the young poets down. Uncomfortably, I have often played the role of Censor of the State, abruptly impounding poems mid-reading and giving the standard “not appropriate for class” speech. This always feels as though I am mimicking a stern principal from an eighties teen flick.

To what extent do teachers limit both students’ exposure to and their expression of societal taboos inside of the classroom? And does censorship really make sense when teenagers operate among constant reports of violence in their neighborhoods and abroad? In five years of teaching creative writing to high school students, I’ve come to believe that the conversation about classroom censorship should not center on whether we should or should not let students read “inappropriate” creative work, but instead on the execution, craft, and purposefulness of taboo subjects in a poem or other kinds of expressive writing.

The way that I’ve learned to preempt students’ forays into crudity is by showing them writers who do it with savvy and verve. Take for example, Charles Bukowski. He is a writer with a gift for alternating between crudeness and tenderness; while he incites an initial revulsion in his readership he eventually wins us over with often very moving confessions.

The speaker in Bukowski’s poem, “I want a mermaid,” for instance,

kicks off with a speculation about where the sexual organs of mermaids are located. He tempers this statement with this admission: “I’d like a mermaid to love. Sometimes in the supermarket I see crabs and baby octopi and I think, well, I could feed her that.” At this eccentric revelation, we almost excuse the speaker’s cheekiness. However, he turns on us in the last section of the poem. The speaker looks at a (human) grocery store checker and slyly says: “I know where her sexual organs are located.” Using unsettling metaphors and alarming images, writers like Bukowski explore the profane in a manner that profoundly and good-humouredly supersedes the sloppy inanity of the f-word.

A few weeks ago, after publicly reprimanding a group for reading a collaborative poem that revealed an undue level of detail about watching pornography, I decided I would have my students read Sylvia Plath’s “Fever 103.”

“All right,” I thought to myself, “They want to read erotic poems? I’ll give them an erotic poem.”

I passed out copies of Plath’s poem and then they took the first part of class to annotate and discuss it with a partner. We reconvened as a whole class and, standing up in my usual center of the room spot, I asked:

“Okay everybody. Let me hear some thoughts. In this poem, how does Plath capture the feverish quality of love,” and after a momentary pause, I added, “and sex?”

First, we looked at the very initial questions that Plath asks in her poem: “Pure? What does it mean?”

Jasmine, the enthusiastic student who sits in the front row, asked a question about why Plath shifts from wanting to define purity to describing the “tongues of hell” as “dull as the triple tongues of dull, fat Cerebus,” an allusion to a three-headed mythological hound guarding the gates of hell.

Trevor raised his hand, and per his usual analysis that all creative work is rooted in drug usage, redirected the discussion and asserted that the speaker's "fever" is not a metaphor for love but instead represents a withdrawal from narcotics. Jonathan, the art-school kid with the black rimmed frames, pointed out the references to Hiroshima in the piece; Plath presents surreal, hellish images of "ghastly orchids" incinerated by radiation and "bodies of adulterers" that are blackened "like Hiroshima ash."

Many in the class were intrigued by Plath's unabashed sensuality. "Darling, all night I have been flicking, off, on, off, on," she explains mid-poem. "The sheets grow heavy as a lecher's kiss." They were perplexed by the odd confluence of religion and sexuality: "I am too pure for you or anyone. Your body hurts me as the world hurts God." What does it mean, they asked, for a body to experience so much pain that it is as though humanity is gravely disappointing God?

And when I asked the class if Plath answers her own question regarding purity, we looked at the lines where the poem reaches its white-hot pinnacle for our answer. "I think I am going up," Plath writes. "I am pure acetylene." Plath's speaker, who suffers feverish nightmares the entirety of the poem, finally emerges in a state so pure, so passionate, that she is as flammable as acetylene.

As I looked around the room, I saw my students in a rare moment of intense intellectual focus that was on par with, if not surpassed, their engagement with the aforesaid Porno Poets' presentation earlier that week.

Erotic? Plath's poem might arguably be the sexiest poem ever written.

After we finished our class discussion, I pulled up on the projector a black and white photo of Plath that often appears on the back covers of her books. The class saw her down tilted expression and the generous wideness of her eyes. They looked at the slice of her smile and her thick locks that unravel like pencil shavings.

Together, we lingered in her half-smile, having been entangled in her puzzle of a poem—that is, a poem that reaches the peaks of eroticism through a relentless insistence on purity. There is not a single mention of the f-word or of nudity in “Fever 103.” It is taboo without being taboo. And for mastering that very contradiction, Sylvia Plath left both my senior Poetry students and I awestruck.

**Cathlin Goulding**

The Benevolent Otherhood is a secret writing society in Oakland and Berkeley, California. Founded in 1899, its current members include Alisa Dodge, Cathlin Goulding, Corinna Lefkowitz, Pepper Luboff, and S. Sandrijon.

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Art by Chris Rae (Alisa) appears on page 29.

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