



2018

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Recommended Citation

Olsen, Allison Wynhoff (2018) "When Yellowstone Writing Project Teachers and Western Literature Association Scholars Meet: A Found Poem," *New Jersey English Journal*: Vol. 7, Article 27.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol7/iss1/27>

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When Yellowstone Writing Project Teachers and Western Literature Association Scholars Meet: A Found Poem

by Allison Wynhoff Olsen

Authenticity, privilege, personal
Self-advocacy, forward thinking, reaction
Relationships
Sovereignty
Affirmations of voices

How do we build curriculum without resources?
What truths lie beneath?
 Slaughter and loss, cruelty and betrayal, creation and destruction
 Historical trauma. Erasure.

“We need to heal to grieve.”
The damaged world—exploitation of the land
Our human responsibility is to love one another.

Lens on an exotic culture
Consider how we may become conditioned
“I’m sorry for what happened to you. We have to move forward.”

Getting the language at home
 Words are emotions, language is sensitive, ambiguity is solved in context
Smudging, learning with an open mind

Writing systems are crippled
We burn out by working alone
We need to embrace confusion and partner
“The best teachers are healers.”
Students are teachers
“I either innovate or I die.”

We are all vibrations. Energy. Life. Humans.
“People that live and breathe what we love.”

Offer digesting time
Balance the wild and civilized
Interview, tour, learn, explore, listen, story

The work does something
Be nourished.

Commentary: The Yellowstone Writing Project (YWP which is funded by Humanities Montana) gave 20 classroom teachers an opportunity to participate in and attend the 2016 Western Literature Association (WLA) Annual Conference. Given Montana’s Indian Education for All Act (IEFA), the teacher strand of the conference program highlighted sessions and events related to Native American literatures and carved out time to talk with literature scholars and engage in dialogue as peers interested in reshaping classroom experiences. Having the focused time at WLA to meet, dialogue, and reconnect with artists and literature at a deep level helped the teachers slow down and dig deeply into texts, question the authors, and reshape/write curriculum that speaks to and with IEFA in engaged ways. This found poem illustrates the confluence of voices that resonated with me during our shared time at the conference.

Allison Wynhoff Olsen, PhD, is an assistant professor of English education at Montana State University and director of the Yellowstone Writing Project. Her research interests include examinations of students writing—particularly the social and relational practices enacted in writing communities and tracings of talk and texts within written arguments—and experiences of rural English teachers.