



## WWA Reflection: Continuing to #WriteWithAphra

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## WWA Reflection: Continuing to #WriteWithAphra: A Year of Collegiality and Compassion

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## WWA Reflection: Continuing to #WriteWithAphra: A Year of Collegiality and Compassion

### Abstract

Last summer, a group of participants in *ABO's* #WriteWithAphra program joined a co-writing group that continues to meet each weekday. When presented with *ABO's* call for reflections in early 2020, we wanted to reflect as we have worked this past year: together. We share here our conversation from June 4, 2021 (edited for clarity) that addresses why we joined the writing group, as well as what we have gained, the challenges we have encountered, and why we are still here. We frame the conversation with a brief introduction that explores the feminist nature of co-writing.

### Keywords

co-writing, writing groups, COVID-19, feminist praxis

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## Introduction

During the summer 2020 #WriteWithAphra virtual gatherings, the opportunity for co-writing sessions arose, offering additional support to participants of *ABO*'s summer program. Bethany Qualls, being the master of logistics and all-around pro at human wrangling that she is, took the idea and, in her words, “ran with it.” A flurry of Doodle polls and emails later, Bethany had gathered a group of strangers into organized writing sessions each weekday. Drawing on her experience in other co-writing groups, she offered guidelines on how to structure the sessions: goal-setting at the beginning, check-ins mid-session, and sharing our accomplishments and next steps at the end. In between, we worked. Over the summer and ensuing semesters, we produced. A lot. We wrote articles, parts of dissertations and books, and proposals for future scholarship. As Karenza Sutton-Bennett points out, we made other contributions, too: blog posts, Digital Humanities websites, op-eds, and reflective essays, not to mention ASECS presentations and grant and fellowship applications.

The words we produced were not our only gains. Bethany's efforts laid the foundation for what has become much more than a co-writing group focused on productivity alone; we have evolved into a robust support system. Like Janine Morris, Hannah J. Rule, and Christina M. LaVecchia, we value co-writing not just for the ways in which it allows us to produce more and better writing, but also for its “essential mechanisms of access, inclusion, and professional sustenance.” What we have found are the concrete ways co-writing for us has been a profoundly feminist practice that “illustrate[s] the nature of writing itself and its role in our daily lives; the blurred lines between writing support and mentorship; our need for community and security both professional and personally; and the value of mentorship beyond traditional vertical hierarchies” (Morris, Rule, and LaVecchia). Some of us are graduate students reading for comprehensive exams, finishing dissertations, or just beginning them. Others are contingent faculty – those among faculty ranks hit hardest by the pandemic and the increasing strains of the job market. Some of us are fortunate to have tenure track jobs. We teach and study at two-year colleges, regional universities, and big state schools. Our research interests are equally varied. Yet our group resists the tendencies of the academy and intellectual life that hierarchize, compartmentalize, categorize, and exclude. As Jenny Factor puts it, our group recreates a “de-hierarchized” space of belonging and inclusion for members not always available elsewhere in the academy, and that repositions relationships among members not along hierarchical lines but, rather, in coequal connections. Thus, the group fosters horizontal mentorship that is as essential to the success of graduate students (VanHaitsma and Ceraso) as it is to early and mid-career scholars (Shaver, Davis,

and Greer). Our group works, as Elizabeth Porter says below, “not to perpetuate [the] patriarchal and colonial ideas of competition and hardship” too common in academic communities.

When presented with *ABO*’s call for reflections on “writing during a pandemic, focusing on the ‘human dimensions of scholarly practice’ and the limitations of what we can and cannot expect ourselves to do in these circumstances,” we wanted to reflect as we have worked this past year: together. In the conversation that follows, we do just this. We share here our conversation from June 4, 2021 (edited for clarity) that addresses why we joined, what we have gained, the challenges we encountered, and why we are still here. A series of themes emerges, from the personal – a shared need among members to find connection and motivation during the pandemic – to the professional – a desire to complete pressing projects, establish better writing habits, and build networks within our field. The time together has changed us, our teaching, and our writing. As scholars of the eighteenth century, a period during which coterie writing played an integral role in women’s literary success – one that, Betty Schellenberg reminds us, remained essential well into the late 1700s – we are aware of our own inheritance of such collaborative practices that have supported not just our survival during the past year, but also our successes as individuals and as a community.

### Transcript of conversation

**Karenza:** I really liked the idea of having a community to help keep me motivated. It was difficult to keep writing the first months of the pandemic, with libraries and universities closed. It all felt a bit hopeless! When I joined, it was fantastic to find an eighteenth-century writing community that supported one another.

**Bethany:** Getting access to a collective of humans via #WriteWithAphra was encouraging; I figured *someone* must want to do *something*. I also wanted co-working sessions because I was in Indiana to support my mother through her cancer surgery and starting chemo. Having specific times blocked out as my work time made sure 1) I got something done regularly and 2) I could talk to other people. I had been doing some sessions with my friend, Rebecca Shakespeare, in the spring to keep going as COVID hit. It’s her outline for sessions we borrowed; I try to credit her wherever I can.

**Daniella:** I had unstructured time that I wanted to dedicate to certain projects rather than trying to work on everything at once. Working with individuals who –

at least at the start – were strangers rather than friends was useful for holding myself accountable. I was also excited about the opportunity to engage with non-art historians.

**Jenny:** I also wanted to engage with a wider group. The #WriteWithAphra summer opportunity was unlike anything that I (as a graduate student from a small liberal arts program) was connecting with day to day. I discovered people studying amazing things I didn't even know existed! I was isolated at home, and yet #WriteWithAphra seemed like a candy store – or like seeing the horizon I most wanted to reach. But it's easy for strangers to be intimidating . . . My first thought was, "All these people seem to be experts at whatever they're doing, and I'm just a graduate student still in course work."

Initially, when we went around to state our goals, it probably took about a week until I was ready to actually say what I was doing that day. When I finally admitted what I was writing about, Ashley responded with a very specific and generous question about Aemelia Lanyer's country house poem, and it was such an unexpected direction that I did a double-take. This wide world of #WriteWithAphra scholars – which had seemed wonderful but far outside me – was suddenly like the horizon coming close and rubbing right up against my skin. So then I thought, "Okay, I just have to be brave and share with this group and let their brilliance open me up."

**Elizabeth Giardina:** The inter-institution and international aspect of this community really appeals to me. [Bethany and Kirsten Saxons's piece in the recent issue of ABO](#) uses the phrase "Fight Club rules" to refer to a space where we all protect each other's ability to be honest, ask questions, or ask for help. This commitment to support and care has become my favorite part of this group. I actually missed the summer meetings and joined in the fall. Like a lot of people, I felt overwhelmed during the summer, and I just didn't want to add another thing to my plate. Bethany . . . suggested showing up once per week and stressed that I wouldn't be judged for missing meetings or stumbling on the way to my goals. When I finally showed up, the writing group helped me set deadlines and stick to them. With their help, I managed to finish my first academic article and send it off to a journal!

**Kelly:** As a graduate student, I was doing my comps readings. Normally you would be alone in your comps anyway, then: COVID. I started #WritewithAphra to see human faces and participate in my field. It helped change my mindset, too: reading *is* so that we can write. And that's what got me out of that productivity

mindset, which Bethany and Kirsten discussed in *ABO*. I won't say I wasn't productive, but it didn't feel like production, it felt fun.

**Jenny:** Another thing that was meaningful for me was seeing other people's processes. Not everyone was writing during any given session, but what they were doing was all part of moving forward. It blew my mind that somebody's goal might be to write one paragraph, or to go back through articles to see what notes were there. And I suddenly thought, "Oh my gosh, I'm not doing it wrong."

**Karenza:** I want to echo what other grad students have said. This has been amazing for confidence building. Before #WriteWithAphra I didn't have many people to talk about the eighteenth century with. I had participated in in-person writing clubs, but they were with friends who wrote on different topics and time periods. To be able to say, I want to write about this, but I don't know how to angle it and get multiple responses . . . It has been invaluable!

**Susannah:** I had a few reasons for joining this iteration of #WriteWithAphra. I participated in the summer session and heard that Bethany and Kirsten's group was going to continue. I sent a bunch of frantic emails trying to get on their list; Kirsten tolerated it with grace, of course. One reason for initially joining was that two members of my dissertation committee were leading groups, and I felt a vague sense of obligation. But, like Kelly, as of March 2020, I was home with my spouse and our two kids. I didn't see another academic for months. I was teaching on Zoom, asynchronously at first, so I didn't even see my students often. I found it difficult to stay engaged. I also had trouble finding motivation to work on my dissertation at all. When we're all going through trauma, it's already hard enough to write. But then to add isolation to that – I couldn't do anything. By June, I was desperate, and two friends and I began writing together on Skype once or twice a week, and shortly afterward I joined #WritewithAphra. In all versions of #WriteWithAphra, the weekly check-ins have been helpful for seeing other adults and academics when we couldn't go many places during most of 2020. The sense of community in slogging through our writing and big life events has been beautiful.

**Ashley:** I have a heavy teaching load, so it's hard to carve out time for writing. I was looking for something to help me stay motivated and to practice better, daily writing habits . . . So I came for writing accountability and motivation, but I have realized how much this group has fulfilled for me. A lot of it is what you've all been talking about: companionship, connection, talking to others in our field, feedback, confidence-building. The group has become a lifeline, not just for my

academic work, but very personally. I feel like we have all become friends. Knowing I get to see your faces when I log on has been motivating.

**Catherine:** I joined last summer and participated in the email accountability groups, but I didn't take advantage of the co-writing. Because of COVID-related budget cuts, I lost my long-term contingent position and didn't have my new institution yet, so I felt displaced and cut off from a scholarly community. Then I decided in the fall that I would definitely do the co-writing for a lot of the same reasons – the idea of structure, community companionship, and confidence building that many in the group have mentioned. The co-writing was really helpful for all those things. Even though many of you have been talking about writing dissertations, I felt like I was in the same place, needing companionship and recognition of my scholarly work; for many years I hadn't been teaching the eighteenth century but comp, and contingent faculty's scholarship wasn't supported at my previous institution. So finding people who care about the eighteenth century to talk to was great.

**Bethany:** Catherine, hearing you talk about your book project was so reassuring. I was hacking through the chapter that just wouldn't die, and you were right there too! I've also greatly appreciated hearing all your insights about contingency.

**Elizabeth Porter:** I did co-writing regularly in the summer; it was harder to keep up with the schedule during the academic year. But in summer 2020, I was definitely coming into the group from a place of feeling wiped out. New York City had been the epicenter of the pandemic. I needed to do something with all of the anxiety and isolation, and I wanted to connect with people in my research field. But I was definitely nervous about signing into a Zoom Room and being like, "Who's going to be there? What will we talk about?" So I knew I was making myself vulnerable, but the payoff was amazing. I appreciate knowing all of you. Seeing how many of us were published in the *ABO* issue that came out last week felt wonderful!

**Bénédicte:** Even before the start of the pandemic, my anxiety level was through the roof. I was starting on the last leg of my US research stay, before going back to my full-time teaching job in France. I was looking forward to two scholarships that were meant to help me write my book, and then elementary schools went online, I had my children at home, and the library fellowships were postponed and with them went my writing time. The *ABO* writing group made all the difference. Those first 10 minutes when everyone gives their goals at the start of the writing hour, helping you to just wind down before you start writing were so efficient. Because then the writing stopped being like the beast in the corner. It became



enjoyable. I used to be able to do writing sprees, but they were always unhealthy. Writing had always been hard and taxing but not anymore when I had an appointment with all of your faces on Zoom. When I went back to my job and Paris time, it wasn't practical to keep showing up – but I needed to recreate the community and regularity. I reached out to another colleague in France, Antonia Rigaud, who agreed to start a writing group in that format. Since last November, we've been meeting, five to eight of us, every morning. Many of these colleagues were starting their sabbatical years – and what poor timing to have this during the pandemic and its isolation. Thanks to these writing clubs, we didn't give up on writing. We've made a success list, including many silly things – we've jotted down absolutely everything.

**Daniella:** So much of my previous writing practice was unhealthy in mad dashes to meet a deadline. There's a rush of adrenaline in working that way that is a bit dangerous (in that you know you *can* get it done that way), but it never felt good. I was always telling myself I wouldn't work that way ever again . . . And then repeating the cycle. With the pandemic energy-sap and other responsibilities, I just could not find that level of flow – or chaos? – whatever it was that would sustain me for those pushes. This provided an alternative model that is much healthier and more sustainable.

**Bethany:** One of the strange struggles is that, as we've gotten to know each other more, we talk more and more. We started on our best behaviors, projecting “oh yes, I am very focused.” As months passed, things became more friendly and casual. But some days I have to get x or y thing done, so periodically recalibrating expectations so that we're not just chatting has been good. Even though social contact is important too!

A joy has been having people like Ashley and Kirsten read my personal statements for fellowship applications. I've talked to Karenza about her chapter organization and Elizabeth Porter about her book proposal. I really like talking with people about their ideas and getting their take on mine in return. Frankly, I've been surprised by how willing people are to continue this kind of working together. I've tried to do similar flexible support networks many times before but they've never quite worked out.

**Bénédicte:** In the French group, we've actually made a blazon for ourselves. It's a dessert spoon, for the saying: “how do you eat an elephant? – one spoonful at a time.” That's exactly what we've been doing with the writing club. And for support and community, we keep strictly to the rules of Rebecca Shakespeare and Bethany Qualls.

**Karenza:** #WriteWithAphra taught me I could write from home. Before COVID I went to campus every weekday to write. I treated writing like an office job. I almost never worked from home, as it was where I relaxed on my off-hours. The summers were tricky though, as campus got quiet. I would try to work on campus, to keep me accountable. The co-writing sessions have become my virtual office, and the co-writers my office buddies. Before the pandemic, having online friends was foreign to me. But now I have a whole community of online friends.

**Kelly:** I know people say you have to talk about your writing, especially with the ideas we work with. I talked about my Haywood essay a lot, and I wouldn't have written an essay of that quality otherwise. It felt more fun to write, and maybe it'll be more fun to read.

**Karenza:** I'm someone who lives with anxiety. I've been doing a lot of reflecting on what caused my anxiety before the pandemic. I used to get anxious in the mornings, usually when I was trying to get out the door. I felt like I was moving in slow motion and losing valuable writing time. I don't have that anxiety anymore. Because I can just walk down the hall to my office, turn my computer, log onto a co-writing session and start writing. It's made a huge difference.

**Bénédicte:** I think this anxiety linked to writing has also been solved by the writing group; it's also changed the way I write. I've reviewed some of my former articles. And I'm ashamed to say, because of the anxiety level, because of the unhealthy relationship to writing, I think my writing was competitive and aggressive, because I always felt I had to prove my point and buffer the arguments instead of enjoying what I was writing. That has been a major change. The community of the writing groups has also made me less anxious about my voice as a researcher; it's been an antidote to paternalistic accountability.

**Elizabeth Porter:** I would often feel stressed about the idea of writing. When writing by myself, I often get stuck thinking about how I am writing on the sentence level. I would lose track of my argument, because I would be very fixated on word choice. So I think one thing that was really useful about these sessions was time management. We would set a timer for 30 or 45 minutes, and I had to just choose one manageable task. I've kept to that even when I wasn't available to co-write during the academic year. As an academic, it often feels like you are supposed to be tortured when you're writing; sometimes I get caught up in that, even though it is so unhealthy. I appreciate that in this writing community we are working not to perpetuate these patriarchal and colonial ideas of competition and hardship.

**Jenny:** It's great to have a place where there are no dumb questions. Whether it's how to respond to a call for papers, or how to handle nuances of department communication and politics, there's just so much graduate students haven't experienced before, and there can be this element of shame in academia . . . No one ever shames anybody in this group, and there are no stupid questions. In fact, we are de-hierarchized just enough that I would have to think hard to figure out who's a graduate student or a professor. Everyone is contributing from a more equal place than you'd expect. This group flies in the face of this message that graduate students don't have things to offer yet.

**Elizabeth Giardina:** I completely agree, Jenny. Something that's been told to me throughout my PhD experience is that graduate students need to act like they are already on the same level as professors. Essentially: dress for the job you want, act for the job you want. I feel like this group allows me to practice doing that in a supportive environment . . . It humanizes this professional field for me.

**Bethany:** I want to give a shout out to [Susannah's piece in ABO](#) [co-written with Sofia Prado Huggins] that says, "We ARE the future of the field. Save US." That can't be stressed enough. Because here we all are, many are looking for, or thinking about looking for, academic jobs. I knew going into the PhD that getting an eighteenth-century literature professor job was unlikely. Given the state of the job market now, that feels really real . . . but I don't want to lose my community. I feel like this has been a solid way of showing you can keep doing the work, stay connected.

**Susannah:** I think that was one of the struggles and surprises for me. It was a struggle to be so confronted with all the shortcomings of academia all at once in the middle of a pandemic, and then we're all just sitting in it together. It was helpful to know that I wasn't the only one sitting in the job market despair, or in the "How am I going to write something during a global trauma" feeling. One of the other surprising things for me was not only how supportive we all were, but how tangibly helpful people are. We talk about our projects, and then someone says, "Wait, have you read this article?" or "I have a book for you," or "Here, go do this yoga video for that back pain." We send each other source materials and help each other figure out which sections to go where; we spend 20 minutes free writing or send each other a Starbucks gift card for a cup of coffee. There were measurable, tangible ways that we could help each other in a writing group. I figured it would just be a group that met and checked in. But to have something so, so helpful was wonderful.

**Catherine:** I agree. I knew intellectually that a writing group would be useful, but to see it in action, and to see how helpful it was to me and how I was able to offer other people help was very beneficial during this time when we felt alone and isolated. Karenza at one point got me something from her library. It's definitely more than just writing; it's friendship.

**Elizabeth Porter:** I'm learning so much from all of you. When I was writing my dissertation, I was thinking about the eighteenth century all the time and spending most of my days writing. Now I'm a generalist in a job I love, but I rarely teach field-specific texts. I feel like this group helps keep me engaged in the field.

**Jenny:** Combining a couple of thoughts together: Is there a different way of restructuring the strands of scholarship and community in academia? Maybe this group shows that real change is possible. The truth is that some of us will end up as independent scholars – we just won't find an academic job – and others will end up teaching something outside our area . . . Universities are changing so much; everyone is looking for new models . . . Here we take each other one at a time. We don't vet titles. We share passions and energies . . . Teaching is one thing, but scholarship and asking hard questions and collaborating is another. Here we have found a way to separate the two strands and do the scholarship and collaboration *better*. With #WriteWithAphra, we ask those questions we came into the field to think about every time we get together. We have colleagues with whom to explore all the juiciest topics that fascinate us. Being a part of this group allows us to unpair roles and titles in teaching from our personal commitments to thinking and researching.

Right now, the academic job market serves as a kind of conference-and-conversational access gate keeper. I hope that nobody *wants* to live in a world where all the good scholarly conversations are taking place among the handful of people in R-1 departments, leaving the rest of us out in the cold . . . Whereas here, we all move each other forward.

**Kelly:** As feminist eighteenth-century scholars, we're participating in institutions that are crumbling before our very eyes, at the time that we're trying to join them. We might get in or we might not but the reality is, within 20 years, they're going to be such different places, and will they be physical places?

**Karenza:** As graduate students, we often hear that we have to publish to be a successful scholar. We have to add our voice to the scholarly community. It comes naturally to some, but not to everyone. This community we've built is amazing because it's fostered so many scholarly contributions that go beyond the

peer-reviewed article, whether it's a blog post, a DH site, an editorial, or a reflective piece. I think that's a big deal. Because again, I think the way academia thinks about publishing, in some ways, is outdated. However, publications like *ABO* are helping to change that by encouraging different types of contributions, which is helping to redefine what or who a successful scholar is.

**Daniella:** There are other forms of making a contribution – that is something this group excels at: highlighting contributions that are less tangible but so important. I find that the neglect of such contributions is a gendered experience.

**Elizabeth Giardina:** Now that I'm approaching the end of my PhD, I feel like I'm finally hitting my stride in figuring out how and what I want to write. I'm starting to think about what jobs I can get after this academic and alt-ac jobs – we'll see what pans out. One thing I've been sort of preemptively mourning, though, is that I might have to leave my scholarly communities when I was only just beginning to fully figure out how I want to contribute to them. I hadn't even considered that this could just continue. Regardless of whether or not I'm employed in the academy . . . the possible continuation of this group gives me a little bit of hope.

**Daniella:** As an art historian, I was both excited and nervous about the kinds of contributions I could make to our intellectual exchanges. Making my project accessible to other art historians is one thing, but it has been rewarding to refocus on the eighteenth century-specific context of my work. It has also been exciting to hear about others working with images, such as frontispieces, in distinct ways from my training – a good reminder that the discipline of art history doesn't hold a monopoly on discussing images!

**Bethany:** There's been a lot of buzz about vulnerability as a practice and a way of being; I think this group shows how it can work to make positive change. We've got multiple feedback loops of support. So when I've been frazzled because my loved ones keep having major medical events, plus everything COVID-related, there's just a lot of care and reality testing here. Like many of us, it's easier for me to recognize and have compassion for others going through a tough time, but I don't always give myself that same grace. Having people recognize when I have a lot going on makes me recognize it for myself, not beat myself up for not achieving unrealistic goals. That mutual recognition has been really great. I do think that camaraderie makes for a better product, if you want to be product-oriented. Bénédicte and Daniella touched on the competitive nature of how the field wants us to think about ourselves, but collaboration is *so* much better.

**Bénédicte:** I come from the discipline of history. When you talk about your work, you talk about the research process, mainly the “allure of the archive.” You never talk about the writing process . . . This meeting where people would talk about the writing process and talk about it eloquently was a game-changer. It was a steep learning curve on how to write without the competition.

**Ashley:** We've used the term vulnerability a lot, but this group has also offered a space of transparency. I can transparently be the human that I am. I can be transparent about my writing process. Many of us are transparent about what it feels like to be a graduate student or contingent faculty. We can share the emotions that go along with the intellectual work we do. Maybe I mean “authentic”? . . . For me, at least, it makes a big difference. Not just in the quality of work that I produce, not just in my ability to complete work, but in my desire to do the work in the first place.

**Karenza:** Daniella, you made a comment in the chat that has gotten some reactions. I think it'd be great to share it here about honesty, and giving updates, because I think that's important.

**Daniella:** Personally, in other writing groups, I find myself starting to lie – I'm not a sociopath! – but I feel the pressure to perform either how much work I've done, or how good I feel about that work. One thing that has been striking is to see how this group genuinely made space to celebrate all the accomplishments, without a sense of competition or performance, acknowledging that progress looks (and feels) different for each person at various moments. When you're eating an elephant one spoon at a time, it is hard to take stock of the successes that come en-route to the bigger goal, but this group allows for that.

**Elizabeth Giardina:** I've also lied about my productivity! With #WritewithAphra, instead of lying about it (which I confess I've done in other groups) I said what I was doing with my time. This group's ability to be honest and supportive with each other, no matter what we've used our time for, has prevented me from going into my usual guilt spirals about productivity.

**Ashley:** I've also learned to think differently about . . . what it means to be productive. I've completely rethought what counts as a productive day and how much I actually have to produce in order to tell myself that I have been successful.

**Karenza:** I love the fact that there's no judgment and that we can be honest with one another. Some days that I will log in, and I don't want to write. We've all had days where we need to vent. I really appreciate that. I don't have to hide the fact

that I'm still working on a chapter revision for five months. I think in other groups, I would have stopped talking about it. I would have felt embarrassed that I was stuck. Instead, last Friday, when I felt like I was banging my head against a wall, I reached out to Bethany. I told her I needed someone to talk to about this, because I wasn't making progress. She said absolutely, and we spent an hour figuring out my chapter's argument. This is why support networks are so important. We find ways to help our co-writers out of their writing holes, knowing they would do the same for us.

**Bethany:** I just want to put in the record the work Kirsten Saxton has done as a group leader. Last summer she led the small #WritewithAphra group I was in, and we talked about keeping the concept going. I know how to make listservs, which probably helped. But more seriously, it's been wonderful to see her generosity, especially given all that's happened this past year. Even when her plate sounded totally full, she would say, "Of course I'll read that thing for you."

**Ashley:** I was just gonna say she's definitely the kind of senior scholar I hope to be. She has done so much for me. I want to do the same for other people.

**Kelly:** I think a lot of the tone has been set by Kirsten and Bethany, through the organization, the emails, and the caring approach. Kirsten is so much fun to talk to and be with. She's a masterful teacher to me, in that way. When she's not physically there, her presence is still there.

**Bethany:** Kirsten's continued modeling of service and accessibility – even when things are terrible – it's just amazing. I appreciate that people have been giving their time to help others out, then how that effort gets recognized more broadly. It's a true delight.

**Daniella:** I value that in this group generosity is not a liability. There's a toxic aspect of academia that says that if you have time to be generous, you could have used that time to be more productive – that's so sad. This group is proof that community and strong scholarship do not have to be in competition with one another.

**Ashley:** Does anybody want to add anything about why you continue to show up?

**Bethany:** Just the opt-in nature that we've talked about already is so incredible. Because it's supposed to be whatever serves you. Like I tell my students: there are a lot of ways to contribute.

Participation in classes isn't just talking, right? It's also listening. It's showing up. It's writing stuff. It's being thoughtful. So Daniella might not respond to emails but she reads them. There's accountability, but without the guilt. It's not a reward/punishment cycle.

I also love learning all the different processes people have for their writing, how people work generally. Like Elizabeth Porter writing a lot of “ugly paragraphs” last summer. I thought, “I'd love to write an ugly thing. I can do that.”

**Elizabeth Porter:** I think that was a big thing for me last summer, because as I said earlier, I would just get hung up on sentence-level stuff. Now “ugly paragraphs” are like a mantra for me like, it's fine. It's okay for writing to be ugly at the beginning.

**Karenza:** That's something that I've been thinking about too. I need to write ugly stuff to get to the good stuff.

**Elizabeth Giardina:** One of the key reasons I keep coming back to this group is – I think Bethany used the word “delight” before – I think this group is just delightful. And “delightful” doesn't necessarily mean that we're always super cheerful, right? Because we've all gone through a lot this past year, and “delightful” can also mean a space where we all feel comfortable sharing the things we're going through. A place where we all can feel a slight unburdening. This group has delight at its core, which keeps me coming back . . . I keep coming back to #WritewithAphra simply because it makes me happy.



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