

Chapter 7. Positionality in Crafting Memoirs: Author-Editor Collaboration

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REB & WLJ: Our author-editor partnership is powerful and productive, involving interaction about a long-term project, a memoir.

WLJ: I am the author of this memoir about growing up in the segregated deep South in the 1930s-1940s and finding a way out. How? I joined the US Air Force and used the GI Bill to go to college. I eventually became an optical aerospace engineer, working on the country's first five environmental satellites, eight geostationary weather satellites, and an interplanetary probe to Jupiter.

REB: As a black engineer, Jeff was a trailblazer for black professionals in primarily white organizations—those with black cooks, custodians, maintenance workers, and grounds keepers but few (or no) black professionals.

WLJ: My developmental editor is Rebecca. I have the memories; she asks about them. I am the storyteller; she is the scribe. I am the author; she attends to organization, style, and conventions.

REB: Jeff shifts among modalities: recounting memories, jotting notes, drafting stories, and elaborating details. I shift among tasks: sequencing events, inquiring about context, recording stories, and soliciting details.

WLJ: My stories weave together, forming a memoir of my life, but they also fit into a bigger cultural narrative of a restrictive social, political, and financial infrastructure affecting black families. To illustrate my stories, I create neighborhood maps and family trees and include family letters and photographs. To enrich the cultural narrative, I use census records, newspaper articles, and workplace documents.

REB: In his memoir, Jeff tells stories, separated into chronological sections—each introduced by historical context, a memory of a person or place, and a reflection. Each section is connected to the next by an intertext, a story about a family member whose relationship with Jeff spans decades. The stories are riveting—funny, poignant, wrenching.

WLJ & REB: We use intersectionality and positionality in our collaboration, regularly discussing our roles, which are affected by gender, age, race, family and community backgrounds, education, religion, politics, experiences—and that we've been friends for more than 50 years and are married to each other. For us, *intersectionality* refers to synergistic social categories. By discussing ways in which

these categories influence our perspectives, biases, and interpretations, we reduce misunderstandings. For us, *positionality* includes our relationship to each other, to topics and processes we're using, and to various intersectional categories. Positionality—and the self-examination it encourages—affects our understanding of and engagement with others and the culture around us. The rest of this chapter addresses three concerns: defining what makes our partnership productive, characterizing differences, and identifying strategies other authors and editors might adopt.

What makes us productive writing partners?

WLJ & REB: We listen thoughtfully and curiously. We care—both about each other and the memoir, acknowledging our similarities and differences as well as project processes, technology, and research.

Similarities

WLJ & REB: We work well together, acknowledging each other's skills, experiences, and areas of expertise. We pick up the slack for each other without being asked. We share values and a commitment to facts and details. Frequently, following a common thread together generates something new, something neither of us had previously considered.

REB: We care about appealing to our audiences. We are attuned to each other's ideas and pacing (and each other's idiosyncrasies) as the stories are developed.

WLJ: And not to be underestimated, we like working together. The point is that we know and can articulate positionalities that are held individually, shared partially, and collaboratively embraced. The advantage of similarities is that we share goals and trust each other's strengths, building on each other's ideas.

REB: While the stories are entirely Jeff's, he values my opinions about ways to refine them. For example, Jeff told a story about his little brother coming up the hill toward their house, singing "Blues in the Night" at the top of his 8-year-old voice.

WLJ: I remember this scene so well! Mama wasn't at all attuned to popular music or movies. She didn't know my brother was singing a popular song. As she and I were working at the kitchen sink, with its big sliding windows facing toward the street, she could hear my brother singing.

REB: Jeff described the scene in such detail that I could visualize it, but I suggested we extend the story with lyrics, so I found them and added them to his story.

WLJ: I agreed the lyrics helped the story a lot. We settled on using one stanza:

My mama done told me when I was in knee-pants
A woman's a two-face, a worrisome thing
Who'll leave ya to sing the blues in the night.

Adding the lyrics stimulated me to remember her response: “Listen to those lies that boy’s telling on me. I never said anything like that to him.”

REB: Our collaboration (Jeff’s telling the story and me suggesting that he add the lyrics) had a couple of benefits: the lyrics prompted him to recall his mother’s comments and, similarly, these lyrics may connect readers to their own memories.

Differences

WLJ & REB: In a memoir, the content knowledge and historical context of the author and editor are dramatically uneven because of the author’s lived experience. Further, differences (see Table 7.1) have the potential to shape and/or distort meaning.

Table 7.1. Basic Differences between the Memoir’s Author and Editor

	Jeff	Rebecca
DOB	1930	1947
Birthplace	Arkansas	Massachusetts
Childhood	Urban South	Rural New England
Public education	Segregated public school	Integrated public school
Undergraduate college	Public HBCU, Missouri	Public university, Massachusetts
Undergraduate major	physics	English
Military experience	U.S. Air Force in US and Germany	No military service
Profession	Aerospace optical engineer	English teacher/professor

WLJ: While I have content expertise for my memoir, positionality can sometimes interfere with audience understanding.

REB: Throughout the project, I can represent the fictive audience for memoir—addressing gaps in audience knowledge and reflecting potential audience distortions.

WLJ: An uninformed observer might mistakenly presume that Rebecca has the linguistic advantage, having undergraduate and graduate degrees in English and a PhD in rhetoric while I have an undergraduate degree in physics.

REB: But that’s not the case. While I have considerable linguistic fluency, Jeff has greater linguistic flexibility.

WLJ: We grew up in families where parents talked to us, and we were expected to express informed opinions. For Rebecca, Standard American English was her at-home language. For me, Standard American English and African American Vernacular English were both at-home languages; German and Spanish were my travel languages.

REB: Both Jeff and I had careers in which our competence in Standard American English as writers, speakers, collaborators, and designers was important. However, Jeff has the additional advantage of being able to code switch, a competence so ingrained that he does it automatically, without conscious planning or effort.

WLJ: Professional jargon aside, our linguistic differences typically have to do with regional expressions. For example, in my memoir, I tell a story about one of my aunts who was an exceptional cook—both in cooking for her family and working as a live-in cook for other families. In explaining her skill as a cook, I said she always put her foot in it.

REB: I said, “What?” I’d never heard that expression.

WLJ: I was surprised because it’s a normal expression—at least where I grew up. So, I explained it means “excellent,” “fantastic,” and “outstanding.”

REB: Since learning this expression, I’ve started listening more closely ... and, not surprisingly, have heard it used by a number of people.

WLJ: We see our linguistic differences as an advantage, giving us access to more ideas and experiences. However, we agree that some things are simply impossible to fully understand. For example, I’ll never fully understand what it’s like to be white or female or from New England or write with joyful enthusiasm.

REB: And I will never fully understand what it’s like to be black or male or from the deep South or solve physics problems in my head. The advantage of differences? We ask different questions about the text.

Project process

WLJ & REB: Our creative processes are flexible, using various ways to capture memories.

REB: Typically, Jeff tells a story while I listen, ask questions, take notes, and jot quotations. Jeff not only reads the notes and quotes, he adds details and corrects errors.

WLJ: Sometimes, after telling the story aloud, I write alone. Other times, Rebecca takes notes and drafts the story. We both read and edit. We both elaborate and revise.

REB: I tend to invite details and incorporate footnotes.

WLJ: I re-read, correct, and clarify. I’ve learned that my writing stimulates me to recall new stories. Regardless of my approach, my task is to recall stories that will be meaningful to others.

REB: My task is to historicize and contextualize these stories. For example, when Jeff told about his family getting electricity in 1935, I found out how long electricity had been available to Little Rock residents. The more than 50-year difference between electricity coming to Little Rock and it being wired into Jeff’s family home reinforces his family’s financial circumstances.

Project Technology

REB & WLJ: We use and share the same technology: *File folders* for family photos and documents. Individual *notebooks* for jottings, ideas, and reminders. *Texting* when we're not working next to each other. *Google Docs* for outlining, writing, editing, recording notes, questioning, and suggesting/making changes.

WLJ: For us, Google Docs simplifies cycles of editing and rearranging the stories in the memoir's hyperlinked table of contents.

REB: Additionally, we have a record of earlier versions of the text, can insert links to useful sites, and create a list of references.

Project research

REB: We're plumbing Jeff's memory and researching social-cultural records in federal, county, city, and family archives. Tracing the lineage of US black families in the 1700s, 1800s, and early-to-mid-1900s is challenging.

WLJ: We have spent hours searching for details about parents, grandparents, great grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. While the rich and famous get access to professional genealogists on "Finding Our Roots," the rest of us slog through the often indecipherable handwriting on census records available online and birth/marriage/death records available in county courthouses.

REB: Even within a generation, the number of children born to a family is easily lost, since miscarriages, stillbirths, and early infant deaths were often never recorded and seldom talked about. Sometimes, we find information in unusual places. For example, we found a treasured letter from Jeff's grandfather to his mother, carefully folded and placed by her in an envelope of her recipes.

WLJ: We listen to my cousins as they talk about their experiences, turning page after page of reunion yearbooks. We have seen the process take unexpected turns—like the time I realized siblings three generations back were, in fact, twins.

REB: We understand that family stories are part of a network that takes time to weave together.

What characterizes distinctions in positionality?

WLJ & REB: We are interested in ways positionality can make Jeff's memoir both meaningful and accurate. In this chapter, we refer to three stories from the memoir, showing ways positionality influences our attitudes and actions. For each story, we provide a brief synopsis and identify some questions we raised as we wrote and edited the story.

A First Story

WLJ: In "My First White Friend," my four-year-old self introduces my best friend,

a four-year-old white boy, Phillip McNema. Our homes were two blocks apart, at the edges of the black neighborhood in Little Rock where I lived on Fulton Street and the white neighborhood where Phillip lived on IZARD Street. We shared toys, ran in and out of each other's houses, and played cowboys and Indians in our backyards.

REB: My editorial suggestion? Add more information about the equity in the friendship. For example: When you ate at Phillip's house, you both had the *same* lunch, which you ate *together*, prepared for you by the McNema's maid, who Phillip called Claudine and you called Mrs. Parker. Phillip's father bought ice cream cones for both of you when you went to the store with him. None of these things were common practices in the deep South in the early 1930s.

WLJ: Because of Rebecca's suggestions, I elaborated the story to add more details and wrote a commentary about whether my parents and his were at all concerned with our friendship and about the insidious role our early education had in ending our friendship. (See box.)

REB: Your felt sense of cultural context, barely perceived when you were 4, evolved into articulable differences by the time you were an adult.

Excerpt from "My First White Friend": Did our parents worry about our friendship? Probably not. I can only speculate they knew our being best friends would stop without them having to do anything. When? Phillip and I went to first grade: He went to a white school, and I went to a black school. We no longer interacted with each other at all.

A Second Story

WLJ: In "Flood Plains," I explained that my neighborhood elementary school was in the floodplain of Fourche Creek. My school's playground and Crump Park (the adjacent city park and ball field) all flooded during heavy rains.

REB: In many communities, the poorest citizens lived in flood plains, their homes and businesses at risk and often damaged. In some Southern communities, municipal ordinances even dictated where people could live.

WLJ: When I was writing this story, I was also reading Isabel Wilkerson's book, *Caste*, which reinforced my own experiences about neighborhood demographics.

REB: My editorial suggestions for "Flood Plains" included adding a footnote about the current use of the school and the city park, which had been home to Negro League baseball teams.

WLJ: Once I read the footnote that Rebecca added to the memoir about Crump Park, I recalled that the man after whom the park was named owned a pool hall (also called Crump's) across the street from the school. Revising "Flood Plains" generated a new story, "Pool Hall." (Read box.)

Excerpt From “Pool Hall:” Crump’s, at the edge of the flood plain, is where I learned to shoot pool when I was an early teenager. Mama was working as an elevator operator at night and didn’t get off until 11pm. Daddy came home from his store and went to bed very early. After Daddy went to bed and after my little brother went to sleep but before Mama got home, I snuck out to the pool hall, about 4-5 blocks from our house. I concentrated on learning to shoot pool. I became a good pool player but was never great because I didn’t get enough practice. Every game cost a nickel, which was a lot of money to me then.

A Third Story

WLJ: “Racism and Expectations” focuses on an incident from my professional life as an aerospace optical engineer at Santa Barbara Research Center (SBRC).

REB: One of Jeff’s responsibilities included serving as a vendor liaison, which meant being the primary contact between SBRC and vendors, managing all technical details of contracts.

WLJ: When a contract is awarded, any vendor’s first task is to submit an acceptance test procedure (ATP)—a report that provides a detailed description of tests, administered before delivery, to prove the vendor has satisfied SBRC’s specifications.

REB: An excerpt from the story describes this report’s quality and Jeff’s reaction. (Read box.)

WLJ: Rebecca and I discussed possible reasons for the company’s action—a major defense contractor submitting an unacceptable report for an important project. Indifference? Incompetence? Racism?

REB: Jeff said he didn’t see any other black employees when he initially visited this company

Excerpt from “Racism And Expectations”: I read the vendor’s ATP when it arrived. I realized it was unacceptable—simply crap. It did not effectively describe the testing process, the tests themselves were inadequate, and the process was insufficiently justified. Who did I inform that the ATP was unacceptable?

- My boss (responsible for multiple aerospace projects, from weather satellites to interplanetary probes)
- SBRC’s in-house buyer (who wrote the contract)
- SBRC’s in-house quality control inspector

My response? I got on a plane, flying from Santa Barbara to the east coast. The vendor knew I was coming specifically to talk about their unacceptable ATP. I was ready to cancel the contract. My first meeting was with a manager who said, “You’re a quiet guy, but you sure carry a damn big stick.” I had a single question: “Why did you submit such crap?” The answer? “We didn’t think you’d read it.”

nor during 15 to 20 visits during the duration of the contract (odd since approximately 12% of the city's population was black).

WLJ: The likely reasons for the vendor's action? Racism combined with inattention to in-process inspection. First, the company was not accustomed to dealing with black professionals, so perhaps their lack of experience provoked unintended prejudices. Second, the company needed to assign knowledgeable, independent inspectors for our project. And third, they were accustomed to some government inspectors accepting nearly anything the company inspectors told them, without verification. The outcome? The ATP was substantially revised.

What strategies do we use that other authors and editors might adapt?

REB & WLJ: Jeff's memoir illustrates positionality, both in the stories themselves and the framing that contextualizes and historicizes them. Equally important, the memoir helps readers consider the culture around them and engage in reflection. The memoir's stories are shaped by positionality, not just in their content but also in our collaborative strategies of revision. Our strategies became clear to us as we considered our process. We believe our strategies can be adapted by others so misunderstandings due to positionality will not interfere with or threaten understanding.

- *Listen!* As one of our friends says, "Listen louder!" Pay attention to what's being said and how it's being said. The *how* includes attitude, body language, facial expression, linguistic register, vocal tone, and conversational responsiveness. In our 50+ years together, we've found that problems can be addressed by listening to the other person rather than doing more talking. In both professional and personal interactions, we listen especially carefully when we disagree with each other.
- *Identify roles.* Who is doing what? And why. Knowing our own role isn't enough. We each need to know what the other is doing. By identifying roles, we can revise interpersonal actions to take advantage of our strengths and also to support each other beyond our official author/editor responsibilities. As a result of our work together, Jeff is a better editor of his own work, and Rebecca has a better sense of critical historical and biographical details, enabling her to more effectively contribute to the memoir.
- *Acknowledge factors* influencing conversation and writing. We regularly monitor ourselves and each other to determine the ways rhetorical factors (e.g., argument, purpose, audience, design, and conventions) as well as cultural factors (e.g., class, economics, socio-political experience, education, gender, and race) influence our process and our product. We explicitly discuss potential audience reactions, both the collaborator's reactions and imagined reactions of the fictive audience.

- *Participate in conversation*, including equitable turn taking, substantive content, direct responses, and creative contributions. We articulate (and, as necessary, revise) project goals, purposes, and audiences—aloud to ourselves and to each other. In our heads, we keep track of how often and how much each of us talks. We assess how responsive we’ve been to the other person’s approach, how responsive we’ve been to the other’s direct (and indirect) questions, and how affirming we are to the other person.
- *Propose alternatives*—not to be contrary but to stimulate synectic thinking. What are productive ways we develop alternatives? Ask questions. Challenge ideas. Improve core arguments. Seek data to support arguments. Elaborate with details and reasons. We sometimes create two or three variations of the same story in the memoir to determine which one works best. Rather than thinking “Done is good,” instead, think “Good is the goal.”
- *Reflect regularly and frequently* about individual and collaborative processes. We articulate our rationale for our processes, identifying what worked well and what could have been done better by each of us individually and both of us as a team.

WLJ & REB: These strategies are important, providing a strong foundation for interaction, regardless of participants’ backgrounds or the nature of their collaboration. Respecting and building on each other’s perspectives can lead to effective processes and products.

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