“I come from a different generation”: Quare Dreaming and Career-Making in Basic Writing

Candace Chambers and Spencer Salas

ABSTRACT: The article stories the dream-making that allowed a young Black Arkansawyer, Deborah Welch, to devise an initial career pathway in the secondary English classroom, then one in postsecondary education, and then neither in favor of an elsewhere she was determined to claim as her own. Theorizing her shape-shifting choice-making with “quareness” (Johnson), we underscore Welch’s quixotic agency as she transgressed traditional institutional and disciplinary boundaries and formulae to reimagine what “becoming somebody” might signify for herself and a new generation of basic writing professionals.

KEYWORDS: basic writing; black women teachers; quareness; shapeshifting portfolios

> But now it’s more, so like, is this a space that’s making me happy? Is this a space that I think is helping me to fulfill the dream or whatever it is right now I have in my head? It could change. But not necessarily putting so much weight on these older, more professional people’s ideas. Because they’re like, what they see is, ummm, for a young Black female to kind of progress in their eyesight is going to be different for me in my eyesight because I’m younger than them. And I come from a different generation, whereas like my parents’ generation—which is a lot of professors that I encountered—getting opportunities to go to graduate school all the way in another state was unheard of at twenty-five or twenty-six.
>
> —Deborah Welch (a pseudonym)

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Deborah Welch was born in 1993 to two parents who lived in a Little Rock, Arkansas all-Black city block. For the first ten years of her life, Welch rarely ventured beyond the neighborhood except for Sundays when the Welch family piled into the car and drove to her maternal grandmother's Baptist church an hour into the country. Whether sitting on a church pew or leaning into her parents' kitchen table, "It was just Black folks," Welch explained. Black love cocooned her whole being and the little girl learned to love and dream big and to want better.

As Vanessa Siddle-Walker explained in her tribute to the legacies of Black women educators of the rural pre-*Brown v. Board of Education* South, "When they [Black teachers] told African American children they could 'be somebody,' they in effect were examples of the truths they espoused, thus making themselves significant role models" (267). The idea that Deborah Welch would become "somebody" was the catechism she took to heart during the marathon Sunday services of her youth at the church where generations of Welches had worshiped. And by her twenty-seventh year, Deborah Welch had accumulated a BA in English Education, an MA in College Composition, and was only a few semesters away from a PhD in Social Foundations of Education. In between, she had navigated five years as a public affairs writer for the US Department of Homeland Security, multiple virtual and face-to-face adjunct writing gigs, and seeded and grown herself an educational consultancy. By Siddle Walker's measure (and ours too), Welch had succeeded. However, unlike the steady servant-leadership of the women who preceded and surrounded her, Deborah Welch's professional choice-making was unpredictable. That was how she liked it—different.

Welch's shapeshifting professional portfolio first caught our attention as we worked to "story" (San Pedro and Kinloch) Black and Brown teachers' lives in New South spaces. Among other things, we were interested in the caring-agency that inspired Black and Brown teachers to tend to their mothers' proverbial gardens, the socially constructed frames they encountered in the workplace and the sometimes-irreconcilable differences that compelled some to abandon the K-16 marketplace altogether (see e.g., Benson et al.; Mason and Salas; Salas et al.). Deborah Welch fell into the category of participants we were looking to interview—sort of. That is, Welch never actually committed fully to the K-12 or basic writing classroom despite having the bloodline and credentials that would have allowed her to do so.

As an undergraduate, Welch had prepared to enter and stay in a secondary English setting but never did mostly because she was barely out of high school herself and couldn't imagine being a proverbial giving tree

teacher for a bunch of crazy kids to slowly dismantle (cf. Johnson et al.; Silverstein and Silverstein). Later, her graduate studies potentially positioned Welch for an academic life in postsecondary writing, maybe even at an R1 and on the tenure track. That was the unicorn everyone seemed to be after. She completed a fully funded MA program in college composition and was just about ready to start a PhD. But when Welch figured out just how much money she would (not) make and what her working conditions would (not) be, she deep-sixed that potential career too. The hunger games of corporate higher education weren't for her either.

So, in the fall of 2020, Welch sat down with us to explain more fully why and how, despite her various degrees, credentials, and family lineage of rural Southern Black womanist schoolteachers, she rejected the (post) secondary writing classroom as a professional terrain. What allowed her to do so? She explained that her generation wanted more. She wanted more. This article is about Welch's wanting more and the Black Southern girlhood that enabled that desire.

As a way of an extended preface, in our own relatively short careers, we have seen basic writing morph from a stand-alone sequence of prerequisites for freshman composition to a progression of co-requisite coursework taken alongside credit-bearing composition requirements. In other cases, developmental writing has shrunk to a menu of compressed self-paced competency-based course offerings to redress specific writing issues with the least disruption possible to degree attainment (Whinnery and Pompelia). What hasn't changed much is the exploitation of "just-in-time" contingent labor (Schell; Schreyer).

In 1987, the Conference on College Composition and Communications (CCCC) articulated its "Wyoming Resolution," lobbying for, among other things, improved writing teachers' pay, benefits, and working conditions—a litany reiterated in 2014 and again in 2016 (McDonald and Schell). In between, Cheryl Glenn famously compared institutional practices of hiring short-term, low-wage, and expendable college composition professionals to fast-food franchises' exploitation of an anonymous workforce. In other words, for Glenn teaching postsecondary writing without benefits or any sort of short- or long-term security was a "McJob" as in "McDonald's." Notably, Glenn's over-the-counter service metaphor implied an actual brick and mortar workplace be it a specific McDonalds address or an academic building. More recently, for the pan-academic *Chronicle of Higher Education* readership, Eva Swindler likened higher education's increasing reliance on

short-term contingent labor to driving an Uber in circles around a college campus or campuses.

We know that in the neoliberal architecture of higher education, freshman composition and its variants have historically been framed as a remedial enterprise (Goen-Salter; Ostergaard and Allan). Per corporate logic, it hardly matters who an academic manager employs to get sub-par students to a specific metric of imagined readiness. Thus, for decades, higher education's exploitation of adjunct instruction seemed a uniquely basic writing conundrum. More recently, with 2023 state legislatures in Texas, Florida, and North Carolina proposing the elimination of tenure altogether (Brown), the vulnerability of the postsecondary basic writing workforce is beginning to look less like an isolated disciplinary characteristic and more like a red flag for the future of the academy writ large.

That said, there's still enough lure to the professorship that we continue to enroll, somewhat disingenuously, dozens of graduate students every year into our carefully curated graduate degree programs with little mention of the desertification of the higher education job marketplace. Deborah Welch, as we shall explain, was one such recruit—lured by the shiny brass ring of the professoriate. But the thing was, as we came to know, Welch's thinking about her education, her career, and her happiness was "quare"—a Black Southern derivative of queer.

It's hard to say what queering or quaring are exactly because the constructs resist a neat rule system of This is v. This isn't. Originally an analytic tool for disrupting heteronormativity and debilitating binaries relating to human sexuality and gender, queering has since flourished as a spacious intersectional approach for exposing hegemonic normativity in all of its forms including the metaphorically closeted space of basic writing—"designed to remediate deviant students and allow them to pass in the traditional academic setting" (Inman 2). Critics of color have noted, however, the default Whiteness within and across queering and the folly of trying to disaggregate sexuality and gender from socially constructed categories of race, class, and more (Anzaldúa; Crenshaw; Harris and Leonardo; hooks).

Pushing back against colorblind and class-neutral queering, E. Patrick Johnson proposed "quare" as a uniquely Black Southern re-articulation of "queer." His grandmother used the word from her North Carolina front porch to describe the eccentricities of specific neighborhood children (e.g., "That sho'll is a quare chile") and, more broadly, anyone or anything out of the ordinary. Per Johnson,

> On the one hand, my grandmother uses "quare" to denote something or someone who is odd, irregular, or slightly off-kilter—definitions in keeping with traditional understandings and uses of "queer." On the other hand, she also deploys "quare" to connote something excessive—something that might philosophically translate into an excess of discursive and epistemological meanings grounded in African American cultural rituals and lived experience. (2)

"Reading" a neighbor from a front porch rocking chair or "talking back" to an academic dean are performative strategies through which individuals and communities might turn, bend, disrupt, and/or subvert dominant meaning systems through which Black and Brown bodies have been historically seen and overseen.

Remixing Johnson's theorization in her rereading of Black womanist narratives across the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, Janeka Bowman Lewis identified that same sort of quareness as a recurring feature of womanist Afro-futuristic stories and storytelling:

> There are Isie Watts and Janie Crawford of Zora Neale Hurston's imagination, who want to travel the world and escape bonds of girlhood and domesticity. There is Toni Morrison's Nel Wright, who sees a future beyond her mother's domination, and Pecola Breedlove, whose eyes finally become blue enough (if only in her own mind) to escape what she has seen. There is Sapphire Claireece's Precious Jones. . . they are lost and unwanted, trapped in systems of social welfare and foster care. But they are also representatives of Afro-futuristic visions of Black girlhood, of the "quare" routes and pathways of existence. (97)

Thus, in Lewis's reading, quareness approaches Black women's dreams of accessing emotional, physical, spiritual, and psychological territories unencumbered by racialized and gendered limitations—encompassing "the whole being (or being whole) while the individual self (or who society imagines or demands that Black girls be) remains just a part. Quare narratives are narratives beyond the ordinary" (Lewis 96). Deborah Welch's was, too.

STORYING DEBORAH WELCH

As researchers, we recognize that our individual stories also helped to shape this representation of Welch's story. Our interview sequence with Welch was one of a series of opportunities we've created to hear and receive the lived experiences of Black and Brown educators across a range of New South K-16 communities. Chambers, a Black Southern woman doctoral candidate in Urban Literacy Education, was assigned to collaborate with Salas, a Chamorro male faculty mentor, in a Fall 2020 research apprenticeship. Chambers approached Welch, her longtime colleague, about a potential interview sequence. Welch readily accepted.

We value stories because, as Irving Seidman put it, storytelling "is [a] process of selecting constitutive details of experience, reflecting on them, giving them order, and thereby making sense of them that makes telling stories a meaning-making experience" (7). Or, as Timothy San Pedro and Valerie Kinloch theorized, storying is both a research method and practice that intentionally centers "the realities, desires, and stories of the people with whom we work as we also situate their stories in relation to our stories, lives, and research projects in humanizing ways" (374S).

Leveraging Seidman's in-depth interview protocol, we accessed Welch's story across three 90-minute interviews distributed over two weeks. The first layer of the in-depth interview sequence established Welch's "life story" from her Little Rock, Arkansas childhood to the present. The second asked Welch to elaborate on certain critical incidents related to the intersection of her Black femininity and the educational and professional choice-making to which she had alluded in the first interview. The final 90-minute interview asked Welch to make meaning of her non-traditional career through the lens of her layered and complex identity as Black Southern woman.

We approached the sum of Welch's interview transcripts as "fictions"—"In the sense that they are 'something made,' 'something fashioned' . . . not that they are false, unfactual, or merely 'as if' thought experiments" (Geertz 15). We set about "transforming" the data in an interplay of descriptive, analytic, and interpretive moves (Wolcott). After multiple (re)readings of the complete transcripts, the authors met together for a series of analytic conversations that included our reconstruction of Welch's professional chronology. Guided by our theoretical framework and using the comment function in Microsoft Word, we then bracketed segments of the interview transcript such as "I come from a different generation; You kind of make your own cushion; I guess being like a smart girl or whatever." These data

quotations were the prompts for the initial and then integrative memos we composed around Welch's professional dream-making and the basis for the representation we present here (Emerson et al.). Finally, we note that Welch read the entire manuscript before submission; and we made large and small edits based on her input.

QUARE DREAMING

In the sections that follow, we organize Welch's trajectory into a sequence of quare dreams—fugitive spaces that allowed her to imagine an initial career pathway in the secondary English classroom, then one in postsecondary education, and then neither in favor of an elsewhere she was determined to claim as her own. In so doing, we underscore Welch's quixotic agency as she reimagined what "becoming somebody" might also signify—and in ways that transgressed and improvised traditional institutional and disciplinary binaries and formulae.

Quare Dream Sequence #1: Imagining a Pathway

Welch's mother, a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) graduate with a degree in education, taught Welch to read before kindergarten. Deborah Welch was a well-behaved and diligent student. By the fourth grade, she was tapped for "a special school, I guess you could call it." Her parents enrolled their young, gifted, and Black daughter in the city's academic and performing arts magnet where Welch remained for the last seven years of her K-12 education.

At the top of her high school class, Welch received a variety of undergraduate scholarship offers—"books, everything was included." She decided on Harris-Stowe State University in St. Louis, Missouri, wavering between journalism and education as a major. Although she had been away from home before on annual Girl Scout camps, and even if St. Louis was exciting, Welch was homesick. She wasn't convinced that Harris-Stowe was the place for her to be. She explained,

> I used to pray all the time, 'God, can you help me figure out this decision on what I'm going to do for my life?' So that's kind of the decision I was wrestling with when I went to Harris-Stowe.

She left Harris-Stowe at the end of the fall semester. Back in Little Rock, she followed up with Philander Smith University—asking if she could have a re-do on the scholarship she had declined in favor of Harris-Stowe. The

response was negative, but Welch still had her FAFSA funding, and because of the frugality her parents instilled in her, Welch never took out a loan.

She declared a major in English education and commuted from home to campus daily—"So I got on the bus, things of that nature. When I started at Philander, I loved it—the feeling that I had when I got there. So, I said, 'I'm good at this writing thing. I don't really like literature. But I'll just deal with it.'"

As the semesters passed, Welch became gradually more involved on campus. She signed up for an HIV awareness initiative and then as a writer for the university's student newspaper, where she stayed on through graduation—"I enjoyed it. I wrote commentaries and interviewed people on campus for other stories." In her junior year, she also entered a paid student public affairs internship program with the US Department of Homeland Security, where she worked seven hours a week during the school year and full-time during the summer and the long Christmas break—writing feature stories for the state of Arkansas' website and Homeland Security blogs mostly.

For her year-long student teaching assignment, Welch purposefully chose two distinct sites: a Black middle school in the city where she would spend the fall semester, and a high school in the rural environs of a neighboring county—"Where the White people lived"—where she would teach in the spring.

Her first semester was chaotic and energizing at the same time. Her mentor teachers—all older Black women—took a tough-love approach, and it worked for them. In her own classroom, Welch developed strong relationships with her seventh-grade students. Consequently, she explained, "I could teach them whatever I want to teach them." The students trusted Welch. She was one of them.

In contrast, her spring placement with a ninth-grade class in a semi-rural, very White middle-class high school was awkward. Her cooperating teacher, a White woman, had not expected Welch to be Black—"'You come from Philander? The Black school?—not even from like one of the White schools?' So, it was a very, it was very weird." Welch could recall "teaching a lesson and then a unit but otherwise not much."

As graduation approached, Welch received a verbal offer to return to the (Black) middle school full-time. In the meantime, her undergraduate advisor at the time encouraged her to think about graduate school. She was, the advisor argued, still single and without any sort of child-rearing responsibilities. Welch's colleagues at Homeland Security chimed in to encourage her to continue her studies, citing her academic and professional

success—and her unusual situation (as everybody told her) of not having any children who depended on her. "It's kinda like, 'Oh, you haven't gotten pregnant? You're an outlier. You should go and get your graduate degree." And I was just like, 'Okay.'"

Welch applied to various MA programs in rhetoric and composition and received a full ride from the University of Georgia. Since she would not be paying anything, Welch decided to accept the offer and put secondary classroom teaching on hold—at least for the moment. She wanted to see what else she could do. She felt it was the moment to take a chance.

Quare Dream Sequence #2: (Re)Turning Home

At the age of 21, Welch found herself in the comparatively rare situation of having a professional choice. She might very well have simply taken the middle-school job and stayed there for the next forty years. Teaching was in her blood. So many of the women around and before her had made that choice—to serve. But Welch still wondered what was out there—what other future she could make for herself. And as everybody was telling her, because she was not yet pregnant, now was the time to do it. The University of Georgia seemed like a far-away place. Welch knew that she would be homesick. But it wasn't forever, and an MA would open long-shuttered doors to Black country girls like her.

Athens, GA was not any more Southern than her Little Rock, AR childhood home. But Welch remembered vividly the shock of her first weeks in Georgia:

> I had my hair braided for school. I'm walking in with these long braids and they're looking at me like, 'Where did you come from? Why are you here? You're in an English M.A. program, and you are a Black woman? You're not even a Black man.' I'm sitting in the middle of all these White folks looking at me. I'm looking at them and then, yeah, school starts.

Welch realized that aside from a semester of student teaching, she had never really been in a predominately White space aside from the high school classroom where she spent a couple of months sitting quietly in a corner. Athens felt "weird." The city was still highly segregated, and it was rare to see a Black woman (or man) in the bars and restaurants of East Broad Street, where her classmates tended to flock on Friday and Saturday evenings.

In her coursework, Welch struggled with her own quiet nature. Her interactions with her White classmates were belittling—"They'll dismiss what I'm saying—as if I didn't say anything. Maybe I'm tripping? You know, this could have happened with Black people too, but it was very awkward."

Her first-year assistantship at the undergraduate writing center was especially challenging. When the White male undergraduates entered her cubicle for appointments, their double-takes were undisguised. Welch explained that because her name didn't particularly "ring Black," the (White male) undergraduates were often dumbstruck when they met her face-to-face, "They would just look at me like, 'Can we go ahead and get this over with?' I would get those interactions all the time."

In her third semester, Welch began teaching an actual freshman composition course. She was nervous. It was 2016 and the eve of the Trump presidency. For context, we note that just a decade before Welch's arrival to the Athens campus, the State of Georgia had experienced a lengthy public controversy about the design of its flag and meaning(s). The 1956 version (the same year of Brown v Board of Education) juxtaposed the State Seal with the Confederate Battle Flag of the Army of Northern Virginia—the one most associated with the Confederacy and its white supremacist roots. A short-lived (2001-2003) revision followed—blue with the Seal hovering above a collection of past Georgia flags and those of the nation. A 2003 referendum resulted in a "compromise flag"—the Seal encircled by 13 stars and superimposed over the lesser-known First Flag of the Confederacy. Moreover, just an hour west of Athens, you can still visit a Confederate parade of Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee, and Jefferson Davis literally carved into the north face of the quartz monzonite dome of Stone Mountain, GA (see also, e.g., Salas). Thus, the racialized dog-whistles that punctuated the MAGA campaign were instantly recognizable for the state's long-term Black and White residents.

Welch felt even less safe than the year before—"So I would have a student who would come to class with her Make America Great Again hat. I'm sure other people in the classroom felt that way." Welch re-adjusted the readings to explore hate speech. The students liked the course and responded to Welch and her youth. After all, she was just a few years older than the first-year students in her section. Or perhaps it was a combination of her undergraduate secondary English licensure and her teaching lineage that made her section, even with its emphasis on criticality, somehow less frightening for her White students. Whatever the case, a large portion of the class followed her into the Spring section by their own volition. They liked her, she guessed.

Notwithstanding her relative success in the undergraduate classroom, the Whiteness of the University of Georgia was, at times, overwhelming. Welch confided that she would go to Black restaurants in Atlanta to get away from it all and "have some Brown people around me" and began frequenting a Black church on Sundays. In the meantime, Welch plodded along through the degree and eventually befriended a classmate from the Tennessee mountains, an equally young White woman, who started the program with her. Two country mice (albeit Welch had grown up in the Little Rock city limits), the women developed an inter-racial odd-couple simpatico that their mostly Atlanta sophisticates, found unexpected and, therefore, amusing. Welch recalled the pair being met with side-eye glances and wry grins.

For her graduate assistantship, Welch was matched with the department's sole Black woman graduate faculty member. She joined her ethnographic fieldwork around Black community literacies. This was the best thing about Georgia, she explained—driving out into rural Black communities and working side-by-side with another Black woman who had "become somebody." By her second year, the same mentor was encouraging her to do a PhD. Welch applied to a handful of programs and received multiple offers—all full rides.

Through a combination of her graduate assistantship, a remote internship with Homeland Security, and the personal economy that had been such a part of her upbringing, Welch completed the MA not only debt-free but with some extra "acorns" stored up. Since the degree was fully funded, Welch packed a U-Haul and headed to the University of Minnesota to start a new life and a doctoral program.

Two days after arriving in Minneapolis to begin a joint PhD in English Education and Composition, Welch sensed something was very wrong. She turned around and drove herself back to Little Rock, Arkansas. It was hard for Welch's extended community family to fathom why Welch had driven away from an R1. Little old Deborah Welch had worked so hard to get a seat at the big table only to decide she wasn't hungry. For them, Welch's decision had seemingly disregarded intergenerational anthems for lifting up the race.

Quare Dream Sequence #3: Imagining her Freedom

At various junctures in her journey, Welch seemed to possess an emotional dowsing rod for divining what would (not) satisfy her professionally. A whole lot of people back home saw her success as their success. But Welch's happiness, she understood, was hers. The unspoken message

she received back in her Little Rock neighborhood was, "We thought you were going to be the one that could make it." But Welch had her reasons for walking away (or driving away) from a fully funded University of Minnesota doctoral degree program.

First, Georgia had been difficult emotionally. Not only had she experienced a highly racialized two years, but she also saw, in her mentor, the sort of future that awaited her in the Whiteness of higher education—"She had got her PhD later in life. She was a K-12 teacher. She made it basically; she made it to the top. But it was just how much fighting she had to do when she got there in that space." She googled just how much her professors were making in their coveted positions. It wasn't much:

> To teach at a college level, you have to have a master's degree in English, which is probably very rare for people who look like me. Because again, being a Black person and then being a Black woman, we need to be in something that's gonna make some money to provide for our families and things of that nature. And English—it's kind of a gamble. A lot of them are middle school and high school teachers.

Welch was not ready to spend four to six years doing a degree that would require circumnavigating a White space once again. Neither did she want to commit to middle grades English Language Arts or secondary English for the rest of her life. She was still in her twenties. She wanted to figure out what she could do with the degrees she already had. Welch quietly returned to her position at the US Department of Homeland Security to think about her next steps.

We asked Welch why she hadn't taken, at least temporarily, a teaching position in a Black (or even White) high school back home. Her Arkansas teaching license was still up to date. Welch would have been a coup for any school district in any state. Welch explained that over the years and multiple degrees, she had gradually climbed up the Homeland Security pay scale and was already making $50K annually. Even with a master's degree, entering a high school classroom as a first-year teacher would have meant a substantial pay cut that would take decades to recuperate. It was a non-starter.

As early as Philander, Welch developed an interest in entrepreneurship—avidly reading financial self-help books and binge-watching episodes of The Suze Orman Show. She had an idea—one that had come to her during her days at the Undergraduate Writing Center there:

> I used to work at the front desk, and I would hear people calling all

> the time, 'Can y'all edit my paper? Can you do this to this?'—'We don't edit papers in the writing center.' I'm like, 'It could be me—I could be doing this.'

In Georgia, she started editing essays and resumes on the side—"It was my first business. And then when I came home after moving from Minnesota, I started learning more about entrepreneurship, Black entrepreneurship, and financial freedom."

She began piecing together a present and future for herself—trademarking an academic writing business and networking her services across the Black church circuit and her HBCU contacts. Word spread. Welch received invitations to lead college essay writing workshops for cohorts of high school students around Little Rock. She coached high school students one-on-one—helping them find and apply for scholarships that might fund their futures. She edited papers and resumes for graduate students across the state. She did take on various online adjunct basic writing and freshman composition positions. But these were side gigs. She kept dreaming, still wanting a PhD and the title of "Doctor" to legitimize and grow the business she envisioned for herself.

When The University of North Carolina at Greensboro offered her a full ride for a PhD in Social Foundations of Education, she moved again. She was surprised to find that the three lead program faculty members and at least half of her cohort were Black Southerners just like her—almost like an HBCU. The program director focused on making the degree work for every student. He told the cohort that careers were like snowflakes. Each one had its shape. He met with Welch within the first weeks of her arrival for a sit-down to vision-board her future. Welch told him about the gaslighting her University of Georgia mentor had gone through—and that was supposed to be one of the good jobs. Welch explained that she already had an MA and was adjuncting part-time. She told him she didn't want a career in the academy. The PhD she was after was all about furthering the Black business she had already. He nodded. This time it felt different and maybe because it felt different, it also felt right.

Coda

Thinking about Black feminist essays, the women who wrote them, and why college writers should read them, Juanita Rodgers Comfort explains, "I examine the writing of African American women, specifically, because their texts document the authoritative spaces they have created for themselves

within and against particular configurations of social, cultural, political, and economic power" (541). Today, there is less of a need to "account for what makes their [Black womanist] discursive situations noteworthy" (Comfort 541). What's still a stretch is finding qualitative representations of the professional choices Black and Brown writing faculty (don't) make or how, for example, a young Black woman could drive away from a full R1 fellowship and the unicorn career of a tenured professorship. And to reiterate, all these things initially drew our attention to Welch—her professional impulses, her determined refusals, her homegrown entrepreneurialism. We sat down and digitally recorded her story wanting to understand what her case could mean for Black and Brown writing professionals working within, around, and against the White innocence of a discipline (Burrows; Davila; Molloy and Bennett).

First, we need to recognize the extent to which decades of corporate K-12 managerialism have plowed over the metaphorical gardens that generations of Black teachers devoted entire careers and even lives to tending. A particularly infamous national illustration that we remember vividly is the December 2008 *Time* magazine cover of Michelle Rhee, one of many short-lived Chancellors of D.C. Public Schools, with a broom in her hand—a metaphor for the deep cleansing of the system that included the shuttering of entire schools and mass firing of tired and ineffective (Black woman) veteran teachers. So, to a certain extent, we understood why Welch skipped over public school teaching as a career. She did so because she could.

At the University of Georgia, in fresh braids, Welch was the Black girl professor with a White woman's name who left the undergraduates tongue-tied. Her MA studies went well enough for her to garner yet another fellowship—this time for a doctorate in English education/composition at an even more lauded university. But within the first days if not hours of her new degree program, Welch was overwhelmed by the Whiteness of it all. She drove straight back to Little Rock where she was met with the deflated gazes of her colleagues and family relations who had so much wanted her to "make it" in a White world because that, Welch explained, was the ultimate measure of success for an educated Black woman. At least, Welch clarified, that's how an older generation of Black folks saw it. For them, it was about taking a seat at the table.

This brings us to our second point. Across the K-12 research and policy literature, there is a nostalgic gaze for Black women's "experiences, knowledge, wisdom and spiritual . . . conceptualizations of their roles as teachers" (Dixson and Dingus 806). For this reason, when a Black woman walks away

from the (post)secondary classroom, there's a heartache that reverberates across generations. Welch felt that regret too. But her career gaze extended far beyond the city block of her childhood or the fields behind her grandmother's wooden home. Rather, the somebody she imagined she might become one day and was contoured by "dreams of freedom and imagining different pathways" (Lewis 96). Thus, another important take-away from Welch's story is that centering Black lives is more than pulling up a chair to a preset table. Rather, as Cynthia Dillard explained, "It is about thoughtfully and carefully curating spaces where Black being is the table" (25).

However, regardless of who is at the table or who the table is, money matters. It mattered for Deborah Welch. The degrees she accumulated and declined or redirected were intentional material investments in her evolving personal business strategy. We note that as we began this manuscript, in 2020, Arkansas public school teachers' pay ranked 47th nationwide with a starting salary of $35,799. The servant leadership roles to which generations of Black women teachers committed was historically under-compensated (at least in terms of worldly rewards). But for Welch, the 2020 Arkansas public school teachers' salary schedule was just plain old servitude. If Welch had choices, it was because of the heavy lifting of the women before her. Just because she had a license didn't mean, at least to Welch, that she had to settle. That was the legacy the women ahead of her had afforded her. She didn't have to settle. For Welch (and her mentors), not settling meant moving forward with another degree and then another—with an eye on a university professorship. However, Welch quickly recognized the exploitation that even a tenure track career in college composition would carry—if she could even get one. She didn't want a full-time adjunct gig either because of the commuting costs and the time constraints. She'd be working for pennies—she figured it out on a calculator. So, Welch flipped it to her advantage—squeezing whatever benefits she could out of a part-time lectureship while patiently building her own business. We admire Welch's entrepreneurialism and celebrate it. Even so, we do not offer Welch's homegrown capitalism as a business template for our colleagues. We are keenly aware of the symbolic and material toll that the ongoing corporatization of higher education has extracted from its workforce. But it's also true that faculty tend to shy away from the vulgarity of dollars and cents when it comes to program recruitment. Candid discussions about the state and future of the profession are just as necessary when we are talking to applicants as we are when we are singing to the choir.

Finally, we don't know on which quare routes or pathways of existence Deborah Welch's excess of wanting more will take her, which opportuni-

ties she'll walk (or drive) away from, which ones she'll take up for a while to see how they go. But within and across Welch's "methods of refusal and disengagement to challenge oppressive regimes . . . to create and imagine freedom" (Coles et al. 3) there seemed to be space enough for a young gifted and Black woman-chile to make her garden grow all by herself and just for herself. Maybe that's the sort of futuristic homeplace that a new generation of basic writing professionals could do with, too.

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