

GROWING SCHOLARS CHRONICLE

Roots and Renewal: Cultivating Sustainable Scholarly Lives

Letter from the Chair

Edith P. Middleton, Chair, ELATE Graduate Strand · Teachers College, Columbia University

First and foremost, I would like to begin by honoring **Dr. Brandon Watkins**, who defended his dissertation this spring and, in doing so, graduated from the Co-Chair role he held with generosity and care. Brandon's thoughtful approach is embedded in the way we open our meetings with grounding, the spirit of genuine collegiality that holds us together across institutions, and the vision that a graduate strand can be both a professional and human community. Congratulations, Dr. Watkins. We are so proud of you, and we carry your legacy forward.

This issue also marks two arrivals: we welcome Lisette Boer, our new Social Media Director; and we welcome you, our readers, into this issue of *Growing Scholars*. The theme — *Roots and Renewal: Cultivating Sustainable Scholarly Lives* — emerged from a full Board conversation about what graduate students endure, that committing to emergent scholarship requires more than productivity. It requires knowing what holds us. The submissions in these pages reflect honesty and specificity about what sustains us as practitioner-scholars, as researchers in the making, and as people who chose this complicated, generative life.

— *Edith P. Middleton*

*"What sustains you?
What almost broke you?
What did you have to let go of?"*

In this issue...

- Member Accolades
- Feature: What Sustains Me (4 pieces)
- Practitioner-Scholar Spotlight (3 pieces)
- Methodological Reflection
- Resource Anthology: What We're Reading

A Note from Your Co-Editors

When we first brought this theme to the Board, the room went quiet in the particular way it does when something true has just been said out loud. *Roots and Renewal: Cultivating Sustainable Scholarly Lives* was never meant to be another wellness checklist. It was meant to be an honest question, asked of a community that rarely gets permission to answer honestly.

We are grateful, in the truest sense of that word, for what this community gave us in return.

Putting this issue together meant reading essays late at night between our own coursework, our own classrooms, our own deadlines. It meant sitting with poems that left us quiet for a moment before we could write a single editorial note. It meant watching writers trust us with the parts of their stories that almost didn't make it onto the page: the breakings, the doubts, the 7,400 miles of distance, the quiet cost of becoming someone new while still showing up for the people who knew you before.

We want to thank the ELATE Graduate Strand Board, whose labor on behalf of this community so often happens behind the scenes: the reviewers who gave their time to submissions that were not their own, the leadership that holds this organization together across institutions and time zones, and every member who showed up to a meeting, answered an email, or simply kept believing this newsletter was worth the effort.

To every author in these pages: thank you for writing the true version instead of the easy one. That is, in the end, what sustainability actually asks of us. Not to perform wholeness, but to keep returning to the work, breaking and becoming, again and again, with whatever honesty we can manage that day.

" *We hope this issue holds you..*

~ Zizi and Fuyi

Member Accolades

Celebrating Our Community's Milestones

This issue carries an especially full heart as we celebrate three members of our community who successfully defended their dissertations this season.

Dr. Brandon Watkins

Dr. Watkins defended his dissertation this spring, graduating not only from his doctoral program but from the Co-Chair role he held for the ELATE Graduate Strand with such generosity and care. His influence is woven into the rhythms of this organization, from the grounding practices that open our meetings to the conviction that a graduate strand can be both a professional home and a genuinely human one. *Congratulations, Dr. Watkins. We carry your legacy forward.*

Dr. Marci Franchesini

A 20-plus-year veteran community college professor of English Language Arts, Dr. Franchesini brought decades of classroom wisdom into every conversation she contributed to as a member of the ELATE Graduate Strand Board. That same steadiness carried her through to this milestone. *We are proud to celebrate her alongside the community she has given so much to.*

Dr. Sophia Brown

Dr. Brown's methodological reflection appears in this very issue. Her essay traces the honest, often uncomfortable work of becoming a researcher who refuses emotional distance from her own inquiry. That same honesty carried her through to this milestone. We are so glad to celebrate her as both a contributor to this volume and a newly minted doctor.

*Roots run deep, and renewal arrives in its own time.
Yours has arrived, and we are so glad to witness it.*

CATEGORY ONE

What Sustains Me

Feature: Written, Visual & Multimodal Forms

Essays, poetry, and creative nonfiction exploring what sustains graduate scholars through the long arc of academic life.



FEATURE: WHAT SUSTAINS ME

The Woman Waiting for Me

Farah Dashti · Auburn University

"I am tired. I am exhausted." I have been on a train that is running on little fuel, but somehow it keeps moving. I am the source that keeps that train moving and I refuse to believe that all I have worked for is for nothing. So, I keep pushing.

Since I was a little girl, I believed I was different. Life happens, pain happens, and growth creeps in. Problems dressed in human forms come along and teach you lessons, then truth unravels. Anger taught me that I have emotions that I need to face. Confusion became my best friend, so I sat with it. Understood it, until it no longer looked me in the eye the same way.

So, what sustains me? A visual image of my future self. I get a glimpse of her once in a while, as she is conducting interviews, noticing certain patterns, and making change in the field of education. My future self is my inspiration that keeps me going. As a Ph.D graduate student, it is lonely, especially since I am 7,400 miles away from home. Yet, my future self emerges in my mind and smiles at me, and she nods her head as if she is proud of me. She is my anchor.

I have been on this road before. It is lonely. It is familiar territory. I hit rock bottom before getting accepted to Auburn University. I was teaching for 12 years in Kuwait, and I was exhausted. I lacked the skills and knowledge to help my students excel, until a few colleagues asked: why don't you apply for a Ph.D?

In 2025, I noticed several universities were closing their English departments due to financial cuts. After applying to five universities, I kept getting notifications that departments were not accepting Ph.D. students. My heart sank. Emails kept filling my inbox, but there was nothing from Auburn University.

At that point, I gave up. I accepted defeat, so I slept with tears falling down my cheeks and said, *I give up.*

My alarm went off. Then I saw the notification: Auburn University. My heart sank, knowing it was a rejection. My eyes scanned the message — then stopped at the portal link. I paused, already accepting failure. I was wrong. I was accepted to Auburn University.

Eight months later, I sat in an editing classroom in Auburn. I sit there awkwardly smiling while classmates talk about their weekends. They recommend movies. They discuss celebrity news. I open Canvas to write my to-do list: me, and myself, and nonstop work. I am older. I am an Arab. I don't dress differently, but I speak and think differently. My responsibilities are different. My struggles are not relatable.

Then came an email from my embassy, asking me to respond with my whereabouts as my family in Kuwait navigated regional conflict. My tears fell reading their email: *"We are proud of you; Kuwait is proud of you."*

FEATURE: WHAT SUSTAINS ME

Breakings and Becomings

Jake Crow · Auburn University

In the process of becoming, we are undone over and over again. Each time, we pick up the pieces of who and what we are, trying to make sense of disparate, discarded things even as it feels like the whole world is coming apart around us. Becoming is constant. Breaking apart and coming together is like the tide of the ocean, endless and unceasing.

When I think about what has led me to a PhD program in Auburn, Alabama, it's hard to note all the connections and breakings that contribute to a Michigan boy leaving the chilly North for the sweltering Deep South. I've sought a home to reside in — not a physical place, but a career, a life, a *becoming* that both sustains me and allows me to give back to others.

I thought I found this home in my first district. It is like home when a classroom feels like a canvas, each day a new layer added to the artwork produced with students. But COVID robbed the joy of that classroom and that life. The pandemic broke me. How does it feel to lose the purpose of your life?

But through the breaking, we find pieces of ourselves and a way forward.

My second district felt like home, too. At least for a time. This breaking was one I brought onto myself. Too late, did I realize what we did was *to* teachers and students and not *with*. Too late, did I realize that I, and my team, had been co-opted into some larger debate being played out by administrative forces who cared

little for students. This threatened to push me out of education entirely.

But, as ever, in the breaking, we find new pieces to hold together and build anew.

For me, that came in the form of an NEH Institute. There is a strength in letting go — of accepting the mistakes, trials, and tribulations we face — and turning instead to the future of possibility. There is a healing power in telling a story to a group whose stories of their own brought them together. This is what education can be.

The institute gave way to new beginnings as a reading interventionist and literacy coach. But something was wrong. It just slowly became a weight I wore around my neck like an anchor. But the institute taught me the power of choice, even when it seems radical. Applying to a PhD program states away from family certainly qualifies. This time, the breaking was intentional.

When I think of where I am now in Auburn pursuing a PhD, I find myself charged with a purpose I'm not sure I've ever felt. Home is not one monolith — it is a culmination of our becoming, of our *coming-to*, as Cherie Dimaline writes. **What sustains me is imagining what my becoming may be after the next break.** Who do we become when we allow ourselves to break continuously, to pick up the pieces and try again?

Sustaining Roots

Melissa Kershner · University of Cincinnati

It is the last few weeks of the fourth semester of graduate school for me. This is a terrible time to attempt to write about something personal, as I am in the midst of learning postmodern philosophy and developing interview protocols. It is exhausting. And yet — in this moment of busy, I try to quiet my mind to think about what keeps me grounded, and I realize the gift of just sitting and thinking about *me*.

I am late to the PhD party. After 20-plus years in the education field, I was burning out. Rather than walking away, I wanted to ask the questions and figure out why things felt so wonky. Why did I sit in my car for several minutes prior to going into work every day? It somehow seemed wrong to let children be subjected to whatever that invisible weight was without trying to fight for them.

I think of what sustains me not as one thing, but as multiple things intertwined like a root system. Some root systems need to grow deep to support the tree in storms; others need to grow wide and intertwine with other trees' root systems to strengthen the whole family of trees. Our roots are uniquely ours, but over the graduate school experience, we have intertwined to support and strengthen one another.

My roots are created by the desire to help ensure children in our schools are treated and seen as humans and not data points. My roots are my husband and children who make

dinner, roll their eyes when I go to my 'hobbit hole' office, or listen to me blabber on about things they do not really understand.

My roots are intertwined with the cubicle buddy who reminds me when it's time for class. The professor who suggests rewrites when I just want to be done. The classmate who recently had a baby and shows us pictures. International friends who share their successes and frustrations living far from home.

The first thing I did was tape a post-it on my computer keyboard: **"PEOPLE OVER PhD."** I know I can hyperfocus, get overwhelmed, and lose myself to things that are temporal. People are not.

Giving myself permission to block off time for physical movement. Asking for help — personally and academically. Prior to starting the program, I suffered from anxiety that required medication. School set it off again, and I had to acknowledge I needed help. Asking for help is sustaining because you don't have to do things alone.

The beauty of humanity is that no two humans are identical. What is common amongst us is that we are stronger as we allow our roots to intertwine and grow into each other. Allowing that allows for a holistic sustainability during our time in academia and beyond.

Counting My Figs

Lisette Boer · Teachers College, Columbia University

A POEM

My college roommate just
had her second, got
promoted, bought a
house

outside the city, and
sends photos of them
playing in the yard.

I am still deciding what I
want to be when I grow
up,

sitting in seminar, wondering:
where are my figs?

I chose this desk. Some
mornings I believe that.

The dissertation, turning
thirty, another thread,

an accumulation of
something that I can not
name

at Christmas dinner
when my aunt asks,
what exactly it is I'm
doing.

I say *almost, almost, almost.*

About the Author

Lisette Boer is a poet and PhD student in English Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from The New School and teaches writing at Parsons School of Design.

CATEGORY TWO

Teaching While Becoming

Practitioner-Scholar Spotlight

For graduate students holding full-time professional roles in K-12 and higher education, navigating the texture of a double professional life.

Beyond Becoming

Meredith Wisniewski · University of Missouri-Columbia

Teaching while becoming... It's a fill-in-the-blank masquerading as a complete thought. The weight of competing identities pulls at my corners, stretching and tearing my fabric, but there is potential for stitching together something new.

Teaching while becoming...less sure of myself. Despite nearly half my life spent in the classroom, the imposter mask is firmly in place in front of my students. In the gifted education world, thoughts fly with abandon. Their conversations rival the discourse of seminars — and still I hesitate between those spaces as though I don't fully belong to either. A blurry finish line taunts me: why add the detour of more time and energy instead of conserving for the final push?

Teaching while becoming ... more reflective. To be back in graduate school felt at one time like a faraway dream, quickly swatted away by all the reasons why not: time, money, self-doubt. The stars aligned, but to align some stars means others are knocked out of orbit. Being a teacher and a learner does not afford the luxury of extra hours in the day.

Teaching while becoming...the scholar I never envisioned. Papers and proposals aren't written leisurely. Moments must be stolen cleverly, like a petty thief — a few sentences while my son brushes his teeth, a frantic phone reminder right as I'm finally

falling asleep. There is an unfair tension between personal ruminations and academic assertion.

Teaching while becoming...a little less familiar to my son. He starts kindergarten in the fall when I start my second full year of coursework. I begrudge the Saturday mornings I spend wrestling with statistics while he goes out to play. His empathy shocks me; when he sees I am tired at the end of the day, he pats my arm and tells me I can go on up to bed.

Teaching while becoming...someone others think I am. I've been in my current teaching position longer than most in our building. Yet why does the idea of graduating as an expert in anything make me feel like a fraud? There is a quiet vertigo that comes after confidently answering a question from a student or professor that I worry I don't actually fully understand.

Teaching while becoming...who I have the potential to be. The fixed mindset holding me back is the exact opposite of what I would teach my students. Maybe becoming isn't about what is lost or sacrificed — maybe it's about what is built and sustained. To tell my son that we can do hard things and then actually prove it to him is the hardest assignment of this whole journey.

Teaching while growing...

PRACTITIONER-SCHOLAR SPOTLIGHT

140

*Mayah Wheeler · Georgia State University**A POEM*

A friend described what we do as doctoral students and teachers as 140%
Instead of just 100%, we give an extra 40% to our studies
And frankly, he's right
I give 100% at work, to my students
I complete all my tasks on time
And then I go home and do the same thing
I carve out my 18 hours a week to attend class, study, and prepare
Sometimes it's more like 10 hours
Other times it's more like 30
But it's always my 40 hours at work first
Just depends on the season
Many people may ask why I am doing this
Why I want to be a doctor, wouldn't a specialist have just been
enough?
And frankly, it could've been
But that's not what I'm preparing for
Getting this degree is the last thing on my checklist before I
become a mom,
My ultimate goal
So this 140% is 100% worth it.

About the Author

Mayah Wheeler is a queer elementary school teacher based in Atlanta, GA. She is obtaining a degree in Curriculum and Instruction from her alma mater, Georgia State University.

PRACTITIONER-SCHOLAR SPOTLIGHT

The Motherscholar Defense

Janell Pycior · University of Southern Indiana

Background: Before COVID, I had already stepped out of teaching once. After our newborn arrived in 2011, I navigated the motherhood years with 10 years of P-5 classroom experience. When COVID hit, everything changed.

Adjunct: My husband suggested I apply to be an adjunct. I had two graduate degrees, but the new position was with the “really big, big kids.” Eventually becoming a full-time adjunct teaching three classes a semester while also homeschooling our son during COVID — that break from teaching wasn’t a “break.” I needed to clean, make the next meal, or just get some air.

Doctoral Student: In 2021, I enrolled in a doctoral program at the university where I was adjuncting. The thoughts kept swirling: Did I make a fool of myself? Was I going to be “accepted”?

Motherscholar: After worrying, I was accepted, and I exhaled. But a whole other layer of pressures began. I missed practices, games, and tournaments. Every day was one less day I would have with my son. I was a motherscholar, navigating academia while mothering, holding both identities simultaneously, often invisibly.

Dual Roles: I didn’t openly share with my peers that I was an adjunct during the day with the same professors teaching us in the evening. This was code-switching in its most constant form. When sending emails, I would address my professors as Doctor, but as a colleague, I would use their first name. A course question was a colleague interaction; an assignment question was back to being the student.

Full-time Faculty: Then came two job openings in my department. After two interview processes, I had been hired. The pressure was immediate: I needed to complete and defend my dissertation. Then came the defense, and a shift I hadn’t anticipated. I was no longer a student. I needed to peel off that student skin.

Learning by Doing: The work ethic I displayed as an adjunct and doctoral student has carried me through. Not balance...I never found that. Not ease...it was never easy. Now I have a new pressure: tenure. But I carry it differently, because *I know now what I am made of.*

CATEGORY FOUR

Renewing Our Research Selves

Methodological Reflection

On the relationship between research methodology and personal sustainability.

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

When Methodology Asked More Than I Knew How to Give

Sophia Brown · East Texas A&M University

I entered doctoral study before I fully understood the kind of educator I still needed to become.

One month after completing my master's degree in reading, I began my doctoral program. On paper, it looked like momentum: advanced credentials, classroom experience, and a deep commitment to literacy instruction. But inside my classroom, another truth kept surfacing: I was not as prepared as I thought I was.

The students made that clear before any theory ever did.

I was teaching children whose reading struggles did not fit neatly inside the curriculum I had been given. Systems designed for consistency were producing uneven outcomes, especially for students whose needs were more layered than the curriculum seemed prepared to hold. I became a dyslexia therapist because I needed more than general literacy preparation.

What I did not anticipate was that this same question would eventually shape my research life.

As I moved deeper into doctoral work, my interest in literacy became inseparable from equity. Fidelity alone did not explain why some students still felt unseen inside intervention

spaces. A lesson could be technically correct and still feel incomplete.

Instead, methodology became personal.

The turning point came when I realized that every methodological choice carried moral weight. Deciding what counted as data, what deserved coding, and how participant voices would be interpreted forced me to confront how easily lived complexity can be reduced once it enters academic language.

The data did not sit outside of me.

As a practitioner-scholar, I could not pretend detachment. I knew the intervention table. I knew the pressure teachers feel when district expectations, program fidelity, and student realities collide in the same lesson. Because I knew that world, my research never felt distant. It felt implicated.

What almost broke me was the pressure to sound untouched by that truth.

Graduate education often rewards precision that sounds emotionally distant. But my research kept demanding honesty about how deeply this work has shaped me.

I had to let go of the belief that rigor required detachment.

CATEGORY FIVE: RESOURCE ANTHOLOGY

What We're Reading

A Curated Community Resource List

Three reflections from the editorial team on the books that held us through this work.

The Wisdom of Insecurity

Alan Watts · Reviewed by Edith P. Middleton, Teachers College, Columbia University

I found *The Wisdom of Insecurity* entirely by accident during an NYC bookstore crawl. Watts's central provocation: the relentless pursuit of security is precisely what generates our suffering. He suggests that we accumulate memories and expectations until the past and the future become more real to us than the present moment. "Memory," he writes, "is the corpse of experience."

Does sustainability have less to do with accumulation than with the willingness to let things move through us? Next up: *Strangers* by Belle Burden, which my International Book Club just began.

Auntie Kristina's Guide to Asian American Activism

Reviewed by Fuyi Feng, Co-Editor

What draws me to this book is its accessible and personal approach to activism. Instead of presenting activism as something distant or only available to experts, the book frames it as part of everyday life, relationships, memory, and community care.

As someone who has moved across Chinese and U.S. educational contexts, I find myself reflecting on how Asian and Asian American experiences are often misunderstood or made invisible. This book reminds me that activism is not only about speaking louder, but also about listening carefully and imagining more just futures with others.

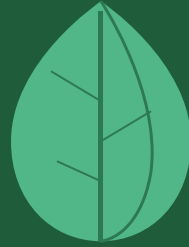
All About Love: New Visions

bell hooks · Reviewed by Wendy "Zizi" Mueller, Co-Editor, UNC Charlotte

I came to *All About Love* already knowing bell hooks as the educator and social critic she was. So I wasn't surprised that this book wasn't really about romance. It was a reckoning, one I didn't know I needed until I was in it.

What stayed with me most was her insistence that healing isn't a solitary project. As a scholar, I'm used to working things out alone — in my head, on the page, at 11 p.m. with too much Coke Zero. hooks pushes back on that. Healing, she argues, is an act of communion, not isolation.

*If you're navigating graduate school while carrying your own history,
this book won't just inform you — it will hold you.*



*“Renewal doesn’t require
starting over —
it begins right where you are,
with what you already know
how to grow.”*

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