

# My Shadow Beast's Time

November 12, 2012



*Photo Credit: "Our Time is Running Out 157/365" by gravity\_grave on Flickr*

## **By Anonymous**

I have been thinking a lot about time and its processes lately. When I took and passed the Candidacy Exam in my graduate program, time was paramount. As in most universities, departmental guidelines dictate that students in the program make timely progress to the degree. There are, however, minimal guidelines for writing the requisite three exam papers. Some said that the reading lists were to help me write the dissertation. Others told me that this exam was completely separate from my dissertation. I then couldn't figure out what I was supposed to write about my reading lists. "Was I to integrate *all* 40 books and articles from one reading list into a paper? How?" I kept asking. I was unable to get a straight or clear answer about what to write. Previous students successful in advancing to candidacy did not allow the program to archive their papers as resources for future students working on their exams. Social scientist candidates in the department were willing to share their work with me, but I felt I couldn't follow their examples because I was working with texts in the humanities.

Still, I read every day. I was determined to finish on time. I joined a writing group, and in two months, I wrote countless drafts of the first paper. The group was organized and led by a senior professor who I eventually learned did not take well to assertive feminists. One day, before a group of other graduate students, the professor asked if I had "a chip on [my] shoulder" because my writing style seemed "bitter." I conceded that the passion behind my writing stemmed from anger prompted by relentless systemic violence. The professor had not expected my response, and he answered by saying I wouldn't go far with my "attitude." I smiled nervously as he initiated the class's roar of laughter. After our session, I felt even the snowy wind was mocking me. I couldn't run fast enough into my sister's arms.

My subsequent anxiety about writing catapulted me into a depression. No matter how much I beckoned it, my writing voice would not come out of hiding. I had to finish these papers within four months in order to be eligible for a fellowship for those who are making "timely progress." My inner critic wouldn't go away: STUPID. SLOW THINKER. BAD WRITER. BAD PERSON. IDIOT. LOSER. JUST SIT DOWN! UNFOCUSED. LIMITED VOCABULARY. STOP CRYING. IMPOSTER. It was not

until after I suffered a major break down that I learned I could ask for an extension without penalty. Why hadn't anyone told me this before? Was the break down part of the process? I had been conditioned to believe that the only way I could be a "good person" was by being a "good student." Facing my Shadow Beast, I realized my self-worth had been dependent upon my ability to produce, my colleagues' perceptions of me, my professors' praise, my parents' "Good girl, m'ija," and on someone else's notion of "timeliness." Western culture has us believe we are essentially flawed, we must constantly work on ourselves, and we must prove ourselves to belong. Resenting the exam process as yet another way for me to prove my worth, I refused to write until I could convince myself that *there is no sinful self to redeem. Humans never fell from grace. All beings are essentially good.*

Although I certainly learned in the depths of Coatlicue, I knew couldn't stay there forever. I moved and began the healing process. I stopped thinking so much about what I had to do and what I hadn't done and tried to focus on each present moment. I began to practice compassion toward myself including my vicious inner critic, my Shadow Beast. I learned that I couldn't go on ignoring her. We had to dialogue. When I listened, I learned she only wanted to help me achieve that happiness I feel when I read, think, and write. I explained to her that I can't work with unrealistic daily goals and harsh criticism used as "motivation." She pointed out that no one taught her how to practice non-violent communication. Together we learned that time is but a construction, a historically specific concept, and we came to a truce. I was finally able to write. I finished my papers, took my exams, and passed at the right time.

I write about my struggle to underscore our continuous negotiations as Chicanas in the academy. Confessing that I embark on more writing with trepidation, I am reminded by my MALCS mentors that I must revel in this moment's sense of accomplishment and the fact that I found ways to manage an arduous process. Yet I know I must remember my time in the depths of Coatlicue so I too can be compassionate toward my students in their times of crisis. The U.S. university system is not set up to be conducive to our "timely" progress. As a capitalist enterprise, the university embraces competition—a race against time—to produce extraordinary scholarship, thereby discouraging genuine collegiality. This system does not encourage us to satisfy our urge to "make face and heart," or to find ourselves, by learning from one another through compassionate social interactions. For this reason, I look forward to summers during which MALCS, conversely, focuses on giving shape and meaning to our selves and community. MALCSistas remind me that there have always been philosophers, artists, scientists, and lovers of "making sense" of the world. I dream that it is possible to transform the U.S. university to meet our needs as humans. I look forward to this reemergence from what may be our collective trance in the Coatlicue State. I look forward to our inherently interlinked individual and collective experiences of triumph.

#### **Comment(s):**

1. *Monica* November 12, 2012 at 10:55 AM

Thank you for your words. This is definitely a process many of us go through, and yet very few talk about it. Gracias.

2. *Anonymous* November 12, 2012 at 11:34 AM

What a "timely" piece! I was driving to my office with my inner critic saying many of the horrible words you mention. It has been a long time since I have written out of joy rather than fear. Deadlines and timelines help me to be "productive" but are sucking the life out of my voice. Thank you for such a thought-provoking piece.

3. *Unknown* November 12, 2012 at 11:45 AM

Thank you. So very much. Thank you.

4. *Anonymous* November 12, 2012 at 6:26 PM

This is exactly how I felt a couple of days ago when I was going through my exams. Thank you so much for writing this!

5. *Anonymous* November 12, 2012 at 9:10 PM

THANK YOU! This is exactly what I experienced.

6. *Theresa Delgadillo* November 19, 2012 at 3:55 PM

Dear Anonymous Blog Author,

In the classroom scene you describe, where a focus on the work and the writing would be most beneficial to all, the discussion unfortunately shifts to “correcting a person,” making an individual Latina the problem. Your honesty appears to have been alarming to those present then but shared here, in this space, it is a welcome meditation on the kind of relationships we build together in academia as well as the self-knowledge and skill you have gained in working with others and negotiating your expectations of others and self. I join in thanking you for this beautiful essay, especially the brilliant observation: “I look forward to this reemergence from what may be our collective trance in the Coatlicue State.” It’s a statement that resonates beyond academia as well as sign of the keen insight with which you have emerged from the fire. Congratulations to you! I am so very glad you will be making a difference in higher education!

7. *Anonymous* November 22, 2012 at 7:51 PM

Dear Anonymous,

Thank you for your essay, and speaking truth to power.

My writing style has also been called ‘bitter,’ but by an anonymous manuscript reviewer who also asked why I was complaining about the lack of mentorship if I successfully received my Ph.D.! In other words, the lack of compassion in academia is pervasive. It is scholars like you and other MALCSistas who will make a difference

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