

2020

A Novel Moment for #WriteWithAphra


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Recommended Citation

Runge, Laura and Howe, Tonya (2020) "A Novel Moment for #WriteWithAphra," *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830*: Vol.10: Iss.2, Article 1.

<http://doi.org/10.5038/2157-7129.10.2.1247>

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol10/iss2/1>

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A Novel Moment for #WriteWithAphra

Abstract

Introduction to the Fall 2020 issue that describes our summer 2020 writing camp #WriteWithAphra.

Keywords

Writing, Summer 2020, Twitter, Support groups

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Fall 2020 – A Novel Moment for #WriteWithAphra

An alarm about the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women academics began to sound as early as April, as people around the world and across disciplines recognized that women, who disproportionately carry the domestic load of child- and elder-care, could fall further behind their male counterparts.¹ The summer's explosive racial violence and essential activism strained limited personal resources even further, putting at risk – among other things – the research productivity required of graduate students, tenure-track, and early career scholars. In keeping with our feminist values, the editors at ABO wanted to provide an innovative support system for our community, to mitigate the damaging effects of 2020, and to seed future scholarship in our fields. From this impulse, the #WriteWithAphra writing camp was born, and it exceeded our wildest expectations.



Figure 1: Word cloud of #WriteWithAphra

What was #WriteWithAphra 2020?

Simply put, WriteWithAphra was an eight-week, international, digitally-based, writing camp for scholars primarily, but not exclusively, in the fields covered by the ABO mission: women in the arts, 1640-1820. We put out a call via our social media and email subscription lists to see if folks were interested in participating in the, as yet undefined, project. The response was clear and overwhelming... yes, we need this! At final count we had 125 participants registered. Largely through the passion and dedication of Kate Ozment, we organized the scholars into small groups and created the summer-long agenda, including weekly office hours via Zoom, a weekly newsletter, a Twitter hashtag for ongoing conversation, accountability forums and multiple platforms for elective interaction.

Each small group was assigned an organizer, and because of the size of our cohort, we recruited more group leaders to lend a hand. In addition to our editorial group, Courtney Beggs, Elizabeth Ford, Tonya Howe, Mona Narain, Kate Ozment, Tiffany Potter, and Laura Runge, we were aided by board members Jessica Munns and Kirsten Saxton. Presented with the obvious need for community, we asked the participants via a survey to identify their concerns so that we could best apply our combined experience and mentoring. Our cohort trended in the early career range, and so many of the resources that we created addressed related concerns: publishing your first article, from dissertation to book and book proposals; publishing from a place of contingency or non-research-focused positions; BIPOC/BAME scholars and international scholars; early career scholars; pedagogy publications and the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Our first general meeting was held on June 23, and 60-plus people participated. Participants came from North Africa, the United Kingdom, Western Europe, Australia, India, Mexico, and North America and ranged from graduate students through emeritus. A generous, positive, and hopeful energy pervaded. Many folks were simply happy to see and be seen, and the interactions immediately generated solutions. For example, one reference librarian offered to get resources to isolated scholars who did not have access and we created a resource sharing Google Doc. Everyone set their personal goals for the eight weeks and identified a required reward system.

Each small group approached the weekly interactions differently, some having Zoom chats or meeting on Slack, others updating accountability sheets in google docs. Kate sent out a weekly email filled with advice and info on a given topic as well as logistics for participating in our weekly office hours. The #WriteWithAphra Twitter chat energetically charted the achievements and setbacks we encountered, amplified with celebratory or compassionate retweets and replies.

Twitter analysis

As a way to assess the impact of our experiment, and in keeping with our focus on digital humanities, we captured the Twitter data for #WriteWithAphra from mid-June through the end of August (see images above and below). Writers took to Twitter to find community and to engage in conversations on diverse topics, including childcare, access to research materials, #BLM, and more. Notably, many of the concerns that prompted our summer writing community were topics in the Twitter conversation, suggesting vividly how much our audience needed this. Writers connected with colleagues across the globe on matters like dissertation writing and promotion, indicating the number of young scholars affected by the pandemic; managing writing and teaching alongside the demands of childcare, speaking to the challenges faced by women and caregivers; and stressors around politics—both on campus and nationally—that affect mental health and emotional wellbeing.

Three hundred and eight unique tweets, 55 replies, and 236 retweets tagged with #WriteWithAphra dramatize a robust community that sprouted organically and grew from existing social networks. We created some quick social network visualizations to identify notable patterns. With over 160 tweets to her name during these two and a half months, it was very clear that Kate Ozment, tweeting from @ABOwomeninarts, served as a hub. Indeed, #WriteWithAphra would not have gotten very far without her hard work and dedication to this

scholarly community of care. The second most active individual on Twitter was Megan Peiser, whose activism connected many slightly outlying communities to the central conversation.

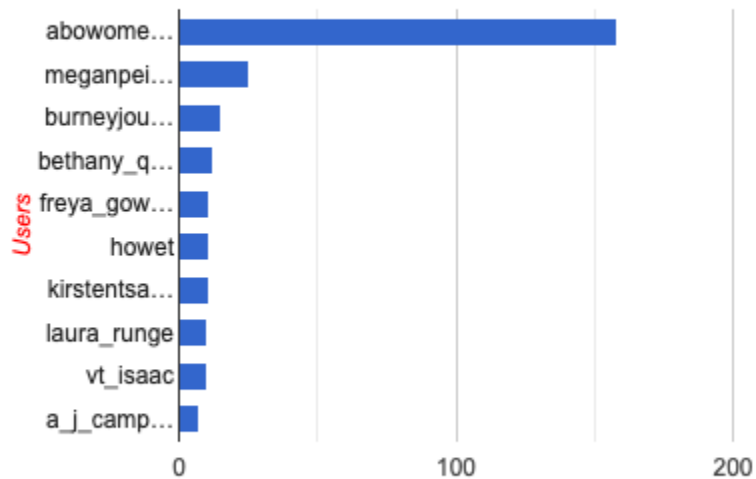
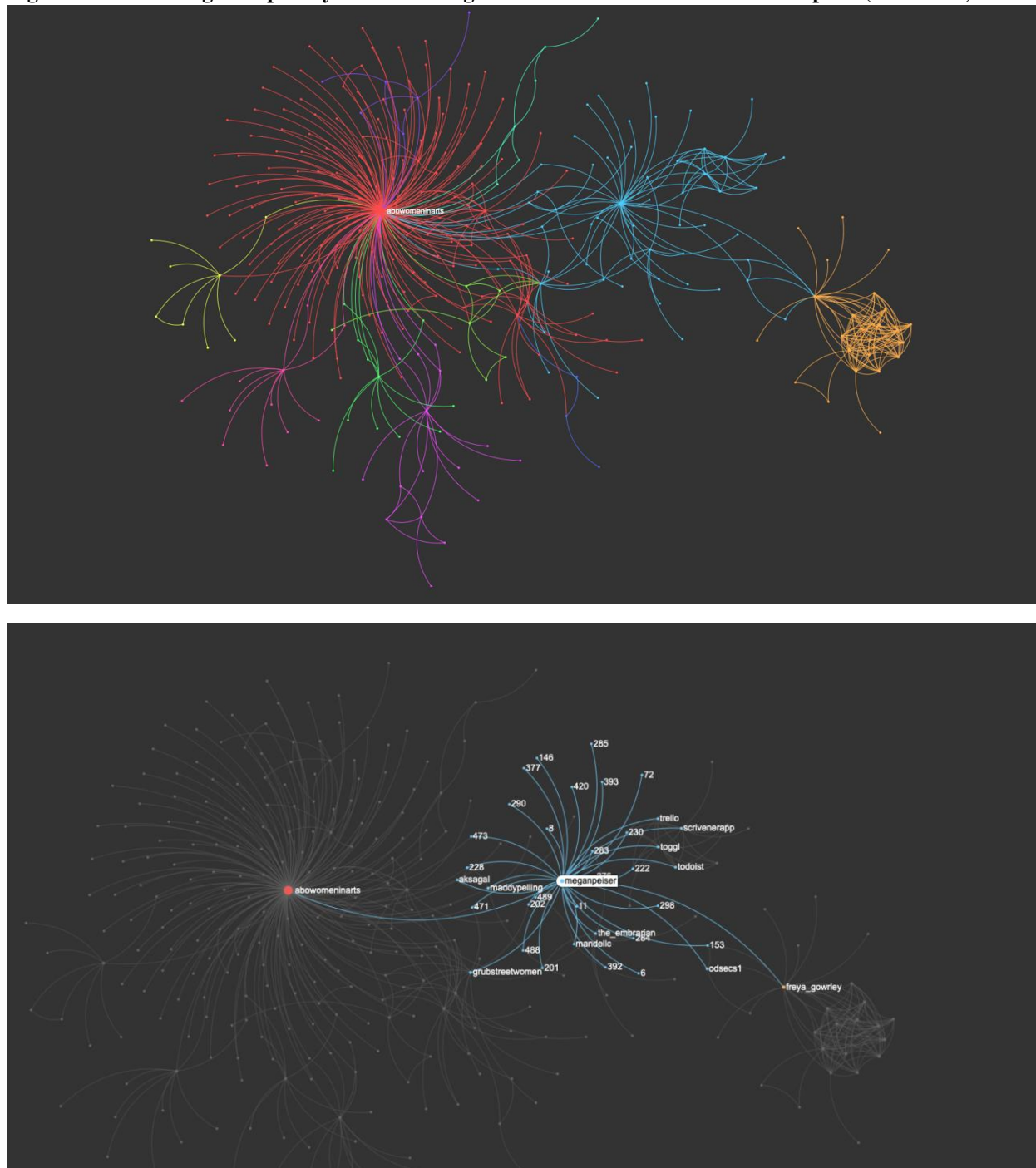


Figure 2: Tweets by author

The Large Graph Layout (LGL) visualization of the Twitter data, below, dramatizes the kinds of networks that emerged and the relations between active users and groups of users. In this graph, we see the connections between twitter handles and their tweets, as well as other mentioned handles. Each central node is a source of various twitter messages, and each twitter message (or other mentioned handle) is connected to the authorial account via an edge (the curved lines). Points of intersection show retweets, replies, and other engagements. The bright fuchsia bundle in the center of the LGL graph clearly shows the driving role of @ABOWomeninarts. Megan Peiser using #WriteWithAphra served to connect a bundle of scholars, including Freya Gowrley, working specifically on material culture and art history, with the larger community.

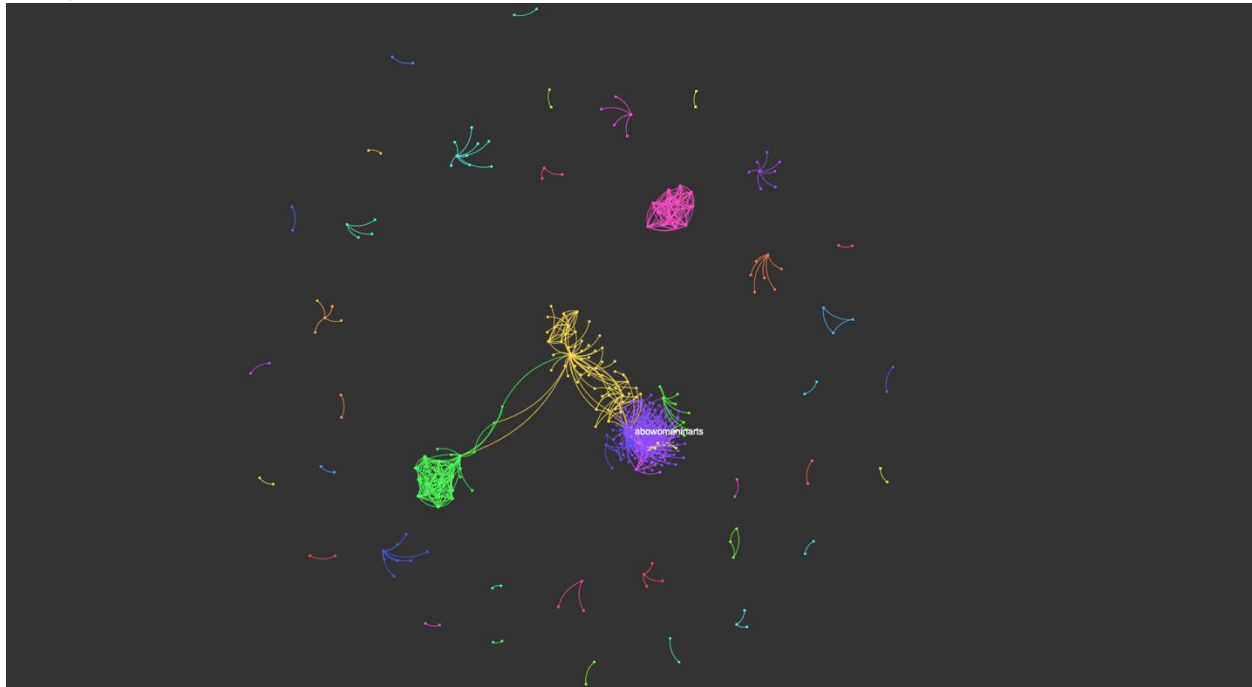
Figures 3 and 4: Large Graph Layout illustrating the social network of #WriteWithAphra (and detail)

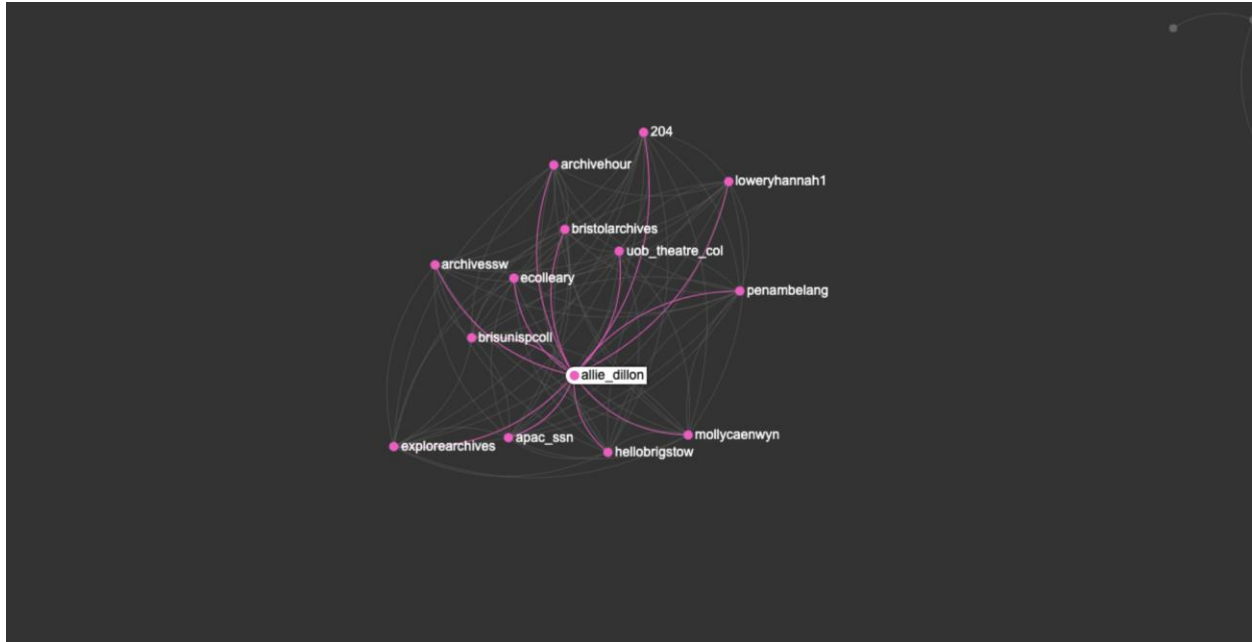


Not all participants in #WriteWithAphra, however, used the group in the same way; many participants on Twitter found community in knowing the community was out there. The Distributed Recursive Layout graph of the Twitter data shows how scholars used #WriteWithAphra for more individualized purposes. The cluster of @ABOWomeninarts (purple), Megan Peiser (light orange), and Freya Gowrley (lime green) is also here visible in the center of the DRL graph, but also apparent are the smaller clusters hovering visually at the periphery. This

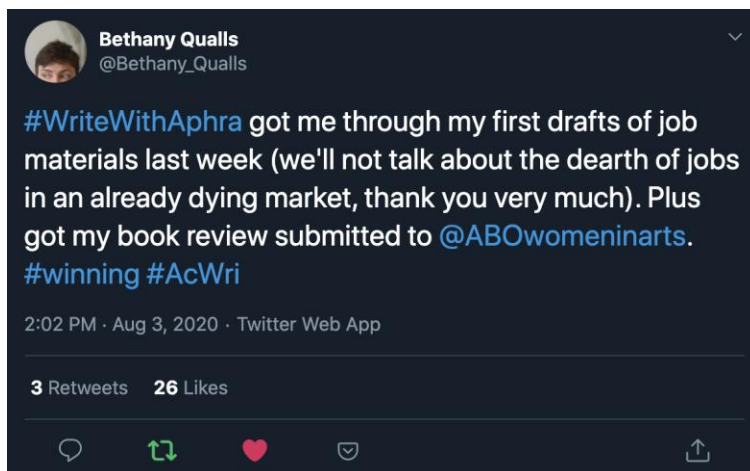
graph layout eliminates many single edges of connection to make the clusters more evident. For instance, participants who interacted more frequently with @ABOWomeninarts—Kate Alves (a smaller green cluster), Beth Tevault (blue), Veronica Isaac (fuschia), and others—were more densely connected to the ABO account. We also see how many individuals and small groups of peers worked largely independently, using the structure provided by #WriteWithAphra for their own goals. The bright pink cluster in the graph below, for instance, shows a small collection of tweets around participants from Bristol relating to archives, and many other small clusters, connected only via the #WriteWithAphra hashtag, document individual progress on projects big and small.

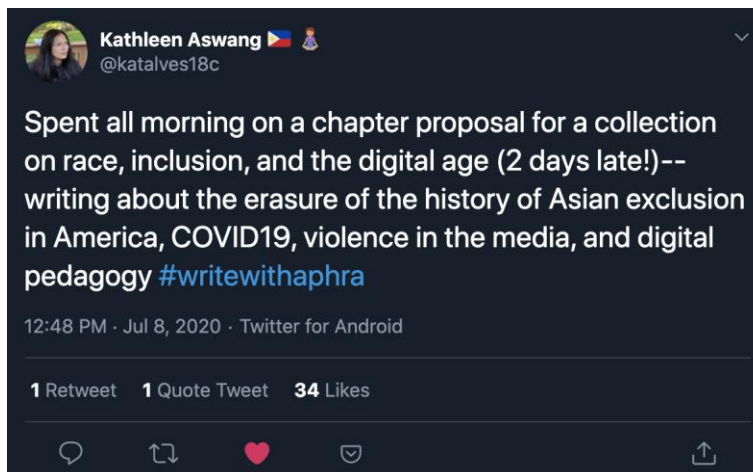
Figures 5 and 6: Distributed Recursive Layout illustrating the social network of #WriteWithAphra (and detail)

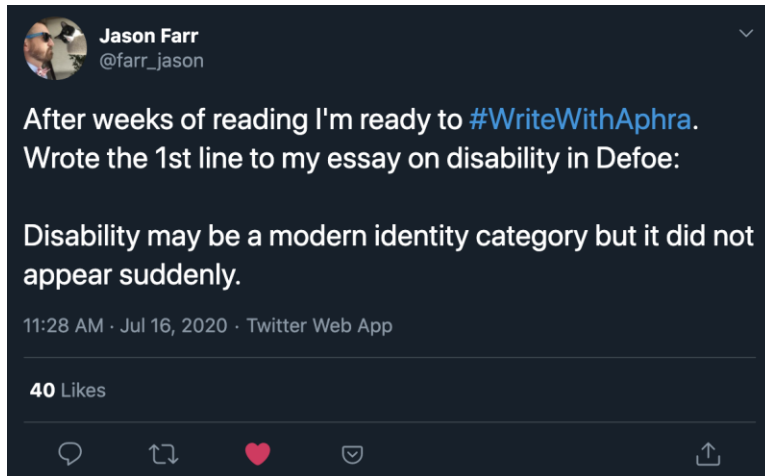




Some of the most interesting general findings from the Twitter data include the frequent topics of conversation. Discourse prioritizing the act of writing and researching, of course, is highly visible. But so too are conversations around community, juggling multiple hats, food, cats, sharing research discoveries, and politics both national and institutional. The most often-favored tweets tended to organize around celebrating personal achievements, especially in the midst of a variety of challenges, perhaps the dominant theme of the summer.







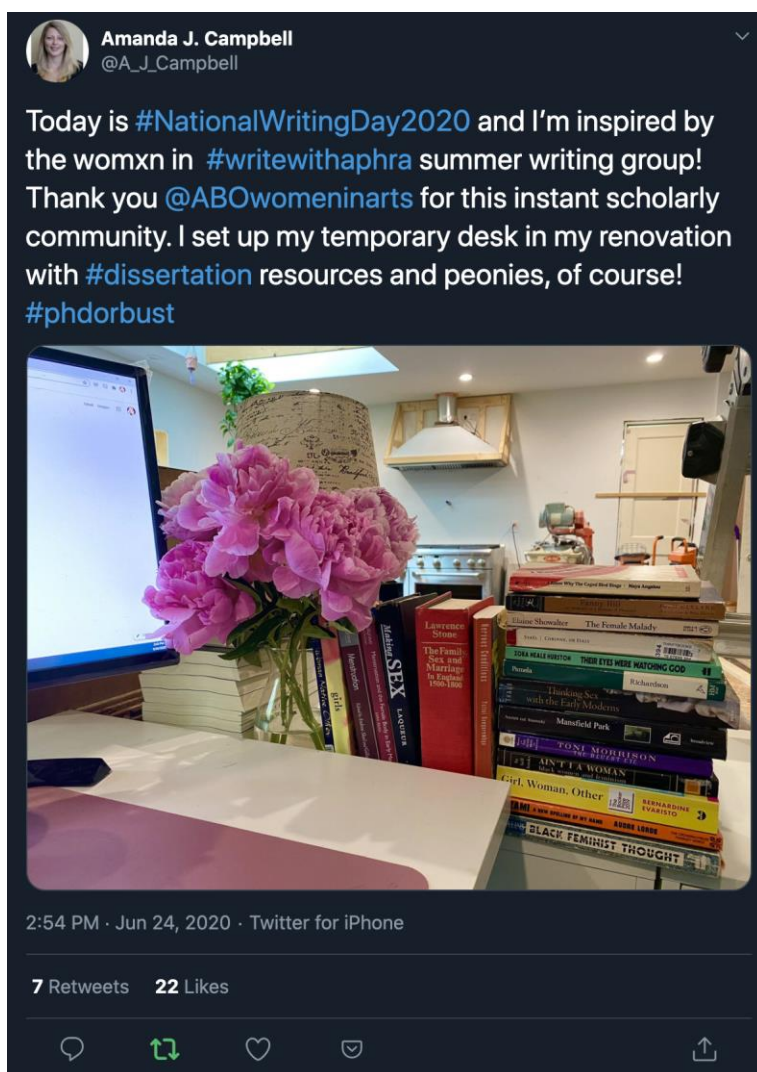
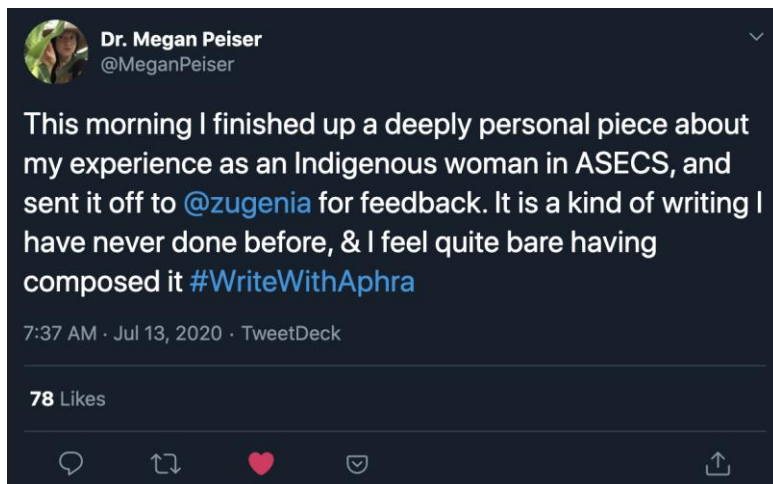


Figure 7: Selected Twitter posts from #WriteWithAphra

Experiences and outcomes

After a summer of hurdles, cul-de-sacs, and achievements, we held our last general meeting via Zoom on August 11 with a noticeably smaller and wearier group. We were not able to change the course of the pandemic or systemic racism; we could not prevent people from falling ill or needing to care for their loved ones. Nevertheless, we persisted. During the meeting, we recounted our successes among which “survival” was considered a significant accomplishment.

An enormous sense of gratitude prevailed as scholars looked to their newfound mentors and colleagues having cemented writing partnerships and friendships. Twenty people responded to our closing survey and provided excellent feedback on what worked and where we can improve for next year. It is extremely gratifying to know that so many scholars felt connected and supported during a very turbulent summer. One commented: “I am really proud that I wrote nearly every day and produced new work.” Another indicated their pride in learning management techniques: “The organization and systems I’ve put in place to manage time and archive my work to make my fall goals more achievable.” Yet another worked on pedagogy: “I’m honestly most proud of the teaching prep I did this summer, though I’m also proud I took some steps to start a new project after defending my dissertation in the spring!” Many indicated that they simply kept at it, writing piece by piece, making headway despite the obstacles and responsibilities. Some completed book chapters and book proposals, others revised sections of work that had been languishing, others completed sections of their dissertations. The community and accountability systems, as various as they were, kept them going. Several indicated their work would be submitted to ABO, which we of course would like to see.

Moving forward

As suggested above, the program for #WriteWithAphra evolved in response to the needs presented. We didn’t have a clear sense of what was needed or what we could do, only that we were in a position to help. As it turned out, the number of participants indicated an extraordinary need, a need that persists. We are in an historical era with the potential for dramatic change, and scholarship, no less than the institutions we serve, will feel the impact. At ABO we are actively seeking alternatives to the status quo of gatekeeping peer-review through our single-blind, signed review process. We are also reviewing the composition of our advisory board to increase our inclusiveness and appointment procedures. We believe our fields are enriched by multiple voices and perspectives, some of whom are the most vulnerable at this time.

The end-of-project survey affirmed that the participants in #WriteWithAphra want more of the same. We will plan to hold another camp next summer taking in mind some of the recommendations for change. Not everyone uses Twitter, and so we will create a sorting system for small groups that addresses communication styles as well as time zones. Having scholars from across the globe did present some hardships for “live” interactions. Meanwhile, our Slack rooms and Discord site remain active during this post- #WriteWithAphra phase, and several participants continue to meet up and co-write. If you are interested in participating, please contact the editors.

With all that going on, we are extremely pleased to be able to offer a fascinating slate of articles for our readers this fall. To start, in Scholarship Emily Spunaugle announces the archival discovery of a hitherto undocumented petition poem from 1798 by Mary Morgan called “Mary, the Ossier-Peeler,” in “A Travel Writer Reconsidered.” From our Digital Humanities section, students and scholars of Restoration and eighteenth-century literature will want to read Fiona Ritchie’s “Review of the London Stage Database,” an open-access digital resource under the stewardship of Mattie Burkert, supported by a team of research assistants and programmers. Tiffany Potter has brought together the first of two clusters of pedagogy essays focused on #MeToo in the classroom; it features work by Christopher Nagle, Leah Grisham, and Caitlin Kelly. In Reviews, readers will find Nowell Marshall’s assessment of Jason Farr’s *Novel Bodies: Disability and Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century British Literature* and Bethany Quall’s review of the new edition of Cleland’s novel *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, edited by Richard Terry and Helen Williams, from Broadview 2018. We hope our readers all have time and peace of mind to enjoy the issue!

¹ Early Journal Submission Data Suggest COVID-19 Is Tanking Women’s Research Productivity. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/21/early-journal-submission-data-suggest-covid-19-tanking-womens-research-productivity>. Accessed 27 Aug. 2020; Staniscuaski, Fernanda, et al. “Impact of COVID-19 on Academic Mothers.” *Science*, vol. 368, no. 6492, American Association for the Advancement of Science, May 2020, pp. 724–724. science.sciencemag.org, doi:10.1126/science.abc2740; Gewin, Virginia. “The Career Cost of COVID-19 to Female Researchers, and How Science Should Respond.” *Nature*, vol. 583, no. 7818, 7818, Nature Publishing Group, July 2020, pp. 867–69. www.nature.com, doi:10.1038/d41586-020-02183-x.