

COLLABORATION AND CONNECTION: INTERGENERATIONAL AUTHORSHIP IN AL RABEEAH AND YEUNG'S *HOMES*: A REFUGEE STORY

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JUVENILIA scholarship often privileges the lone child writer and applies a notion of authorship that categorically must exclude adult influence and intervention. Private diaries, such as those kept by Iris Vaughan and Hope Hook, present few difficulties. Collaborative models of juvenilia can involve young people closing ranks, such as writing projects that involve siblings (the Brontës, Jane and Cassandra Austen, Virginia Woolf and her siblings) or friends (Katharine Hull and Pamela Whitlock). Yet child-adult collaborations offer another model of juvenilia that deserves our attention. Victoria Ford Smith has recently illuminated intergenerational collaboration in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through studies of publication history that explore “documents that detail authors’ creative process” (21); such an investigation can “recover the collaborative child” (21) and, in so doing, “challenges definitions of authorship and of childhood that collectively eclipse the role young people play in children’s literature and culture” (240). This generative work helps frame our approach to a contemporary child-adult collaboration entitled *Homes: A Refugee Story* (Freehand Books 2018), an award-winning project by English-as-a-second-language (ESL) teacher Winnie Yeung and her then-student (now in his late teens) Abu Bakr al Rabeeah, who emigrated from Syria to Canada as a young teen.

Unlike a text such as *Children of the A-Bomb*, discussed by Caroline Lieffers elsewhere in this issue, which bears some similarities in terms of child’s-eye descriptions of bombings and devastation, *Homes* does not fit the basic characteristic of juvenilia in that it is not written by a child. Yeung crafted this piece of “creative

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nonfiction” from notes she took during months of interviews with al Rabeeah. He is the storyteller and she is the writer. They share authorship on the title page (and in fact al Rabeeah’s name is listed first), yet that is often a source of audience confusion, as they reported to us in a joint interview on 13 January 2021, since readers often assume that Yeung has translated the work or has co-written it with al Rabeeah. In actuality, they each had distinct roles in this collaborative venture, roles which we believe are relevant to thinking about juvenilia more broadly.

At the end of our interview with al Rabeeah and Yeung, we asked them if there was anything we should keep in mind in writing about our conversation, and al Rabeeah replied, “I think there’s one thing only. A lot of people get mixed between me as the storyteller and Winnie as the writer. We get that a lot. So I would really appreciate it if we would just make that clear.” Earlier, we had asked if “collaboration” is the right word to use for their way of working together and they both immediately agreed. Yeung said, “Yes. I definitely feel that ‘collaboration’ is a great way to talk about it. Without Bakr there’s no book, right? ... And even though he didn’t physically write a story, he’s the one that was able to give me the story, right?” Al Rabeeah (“Bakr”) himself agreed, and yet offered something more. “I think it is the right word, yes, but also the special connection that I have with Winnie. Also the things we found in common, about my background, culture as an Iraqi and her background, culture as a Chinese. We found some things in common, and that made it more special.” For al Rabeeah, then, collaboration *and* connection are what characterise *Homes* and made the book possible: the experiences they found they had in common, through their “background” and “culture” as Iraqi and Chinese, and through both having immigrated to Canada, contributed to their interpersonal connection and helped constitute this intergenerational collaboration.

We were curious about al Rabeeah’s thoughts about having relayed his story while a younger adolescent, and he surprised us by asserting pointed views about age and identity. He didn’t seem to perceive a gap between his viewpoint five years prior when, at the age of fourteen, he first told Yeung about his experiences, and his viewpoint at the time of the interview; nor did he imagine that his viewpoint on his earlier experiences might change in the years to come. On the one hand, he invoked his identities as Arab and male to account for such continuity, stating that “as an Arab, for us, growing up is like around sixteen or fifteen for boys.” Yet at the same time he said, “What I went through made me grow up much faster than I was supposed to.” These ideas appear to be in tension with one another, yet it is possible to see this disjunction between having grown up normatively as an Arab male and the trope of growing up too fast—which is often associated with experiences of trauma where such pre-maturing is necessary for survival—as holding a tension that enabled or at least facilitated his adaptation to events.

Yet al Rabeeah also indicated that, over time, he had come to appreciate the transformative effect his storytelling had had on himself. Many of us who are writers and teachers of writing tend to think of the act of writing itself as the process through

which one's understanding can be transformed. Perhaps, in celebrating the power of *writing to understand*, we sometimes forget about the legitimacy and the power of oral storytelling. For al Rabeeah, the creative transformation happened instead—thanks to Yeung's care and the connection they developed together—during their conversations:

One of the beautiful things that happened while I was telling my story—I think Winnie helped open my eyes to a lot of things I went through before that I didn't think about the way she helped me to think about it. For example, one of the stories I remember I told her about the mass shootings when I was at my uncle's house, Mohammed, and my cousin Yousef was next to me, and he was laughing. But I was a coward, I was scared. And I was wondering why he was laughing, and I told her, "I was a coward. I just was a coward in this story." She was like, "OK, Bakr, how old were you at this time?" I told her I was eleven, or twelve, or maybe ten. And she said, "Don't you think that's a normal thing for a child to be scared of? You were going through shooting. That's not [just] anything." So I think she helped me open up my eyes more about what I went through. I was like, you know what? Yes, you are right, I was young. Even though all of my cousins make fun of me until today.

It seems evident that those crucial conversations allowed al Rabeeah to become kinder and more accepting, in memory, to his younger self. No doubt they also provided Yeung with insight that made its way into the book.

A re-creation of the exchange that launched al Rabeeah and Yeung's collaboration appears at the end of *Homes* (which, as we must remember, is a work of creative nonfiction), when the narrator Abu Bakr recalls Yeung, his "Grade Nine English as a Second Language teacher":

She tells me about the power of stories, and so we read books together and we trade tales back and forth about our lives before Highlands [Junior High School]. . . . One day she starts our lesson with a question. "What is a secret wish you have?"

That's too easy. "To be a soccer player, Miss!"

She laughs and says, "Okay, and what else?"

My last night . . . comes rushing back to me: my friends, the soccer games, the bombs, my cousins who are my brothers. How they told me to never forget. I realize I carry Syria in my heart. I'm not sure if I'm ready to do this yet but I decide to trust and so, softly, I tell Ms. Yeung, "I want to tell my story." (210–11)

In this passage, Abu Bakr (the narrator of the book) recalls his cousins' injunction to "never forget" Syria and its people while he is living far away, and he follows through on his "secret wish" to "tell my story."

In our interview with al Rabeeah (who obviously overlaps with but is also distinct from the book's narrator), he adds other motivations that derived from his "outsider" status in Canada as well as his desire to educate people about the ongoing crisis in Syria:

I think when I first came to [Canada] as a newcomer I felt a lot more like an outsider, a lot more of a stranger. And that's what really motivated me to tell my story. ... Also as an Arab person who lived in Iraq and Syria, I was wondering when I was there, do people really know what we are going through, do people really realize that there's a lot of people who are dying here. So that's what really kept me going, telling my story.

What happened next, as Yeung describes it in her Afterword to *Homes*, is that she "encouraged him to talk to his family first and two weeks later he showed up in my office, fidgeting with a square of folded-up paper. 'I'm ready, Miss, let's go'" (213). In speaking with us, al Rabeeah recalled, "I went to my father to get his permission, and we sat together, me and my dad, and some members of my family, and we thought ... what are the most important things that people should know about, like in Iraq, like in Syria, and what should we talk about, and what should we avoid talking about, basically." From the very beginning, then, the project was al Rabeeah's idea, and the content of his narratives was determined by him, with the support of his father and family, in yet another productive intergenerational collaboration. Yet what he and Yeung co-produced is a work of "creative nonfiction" that also involves, in Yeung's words, "stitching together lots of memories from different people."

Yeung recalled facing multiple challenges, particularly at the beginning of the project, in her quest to find a way to establish a narrative voice that was fluent in its register and sufficiently close to al Rabeeah's feelings, perspective, and mode of speech. At the outset, al Rabeeah and his family members were in the midst of learning English, and thus the interviews proceeded through the complications of "communicating in a language they were still struggling with." Part of Yeung's task as a writer, as she told us, was "to make it sound like Abu Bakr naturally and not Abu Bakr struggling with English." She was also clear that she "wanted Bakr to recognize himself in the words." And yet, when we asked him in the interview if the book's narrator sounded like his voice, he said "I don't think my voice is in the story, I think Winnie put parts of me in the story." After we asked for clarification, he said, "I think the book is so much about me, it was more than a voice," which we took to mean that he felt that what Yeung as a writer created went beyond representing his voice to (re)creating his sensibility and giving voice to feelings that he felt but might not

have verbalised as such. Yeung's craft is also evident in the character development that helps makes *Homes* so engaging, and which depended in part on well-developed observational skills: "Watching the family talk and how they interacted with each other, and how they talked to each other, was a big part of the characterization that I was trying to do," she explained to us. The 2018 Freehand Books version of *Homes* enabled Yeung to spend more time with al Rabeeah's family members and develop the manuscript beyond a self-published version which appeared in June 2016, just ahead of al Rabeeah's graduation from junior high school.

The three months of interviews during which Yeung gathered the bulk of the material for *Homes* had begun in the autumn of 2015. Al Rabeeah maintained control over the content across those months and during the intense period of revisions that followed, when what was originally envisioned as a speech for a school audience evolved into a book. As Yeung described in our interview, "We'd sit down, and I'd go, 'OK, so what do you want to tell me about?'" And he was prepared with his answers: "He always came in, and in his mind, ... he wanted to talk about *this*, and he wanted to talk about *this*. ... Those conversations were really led by him." The choices Yeung made in crafting the narrative of *Homes* underscore her commitment to following al Rabeeah's lead, for the book opens with one of the first memories he chose to share with Yeung: the day of a taxi bombing, the day that had haunted him for years, the day that ended with him, barely thirteen years old at the time, finding and having to bury a man's jawbone.

In this way, Yeung took great care in leaving sufficient space for al Rabeeah to exercise his agency in relation to narrating his experiences. Throughout the process, according to her account, she was ever-conscious of the importance of al Rabeeah "guiding the conversation," particularly "because we're dealing with trauma":

So when we did an interview, so at lunchtime, he'd come into my library office, and we'd sit down, and I'd go, "OK, so what do you want to tell me about?" And he didn't necessarily go in the order of the list that he made ... because to honour that emotional journey, which is so important, because we're dealing with trauma, we're dealing with, really, children, it's so important to be able to say, "OK, you have to have agency here, you're guiding the conversation, if you don't want to talk about something we're not talking about something."

As al Rabeeah recounted, "I told the stories that were most in my mind. The ones that I did not want to be in the book I talked to Winnie, and I said, 'Hey, this is just for you, for your information, I don't think it would be a good idea to put this story in the book.'"

It is clear, then, that al Rabeeah determined not only what was important but also what was public and what was private. In some ways, however, it became Yeung's

role to discern and then honour what was significant in al Rabeeah's stories. In fact, in talking to us al Rabeeah placed his own experiences in the context of the range of situations experienced by other people in Syria in terms of what is "normal" or potentially traumatic: "I think my story is very normal compared to other stories that happened to a lot of people in Syria. For example, if I go now to Syria and meet someone living in a refugee camp they would say, 'Your story is nothing compared to mine, or what my family went through.'" He thus went out of his way to make sure we knew that his experiences were "very normal" in the context of Syria, or even "nothing" compared to what other families suffered. At the same time, Yeung was explicit that she and al Rabeeah did not want *Homes* to center on trauma. She told us, "The war wasn't the center of the book, the trauma wasn't the center of the book. It was this family, and this father, and this son, and this amazing young man that Bakr was, and that was what the centre needed to be." Thus, in navigating this complex terrain while telling and writing the story of *Homes*, al Rabeeah and Yeung tried to acknowledge as well as decentre the trauma experienced by al Rabeeah and his family.

Al Rabeeah described the difficult work Yeung engaged in while needing to "dig the feelings, dig the details. I would tell her, for example, about the car bomb. 'There was a car bomb, fifty people died, I did this, I did this, and that's what happened.' She would go through the story back again and ask more details, like what you were thinking? What your dad was saying? And stuff like this." Yeung's description confirms his: "I would try to craft the story, and start to write a chapter, but then of course there were so many gaps and holes. And I would always come back with many, many questions, and oftentimes he would have to carry home a list of questions for his family." Some of these gaps they filled together, doing research online (to verify the date of a massacre, for instance, or the name of a particular kind of weapon). Some could only be filled from his memory, or his family's. This was especially "difficult," Yeung notes, because of "what trauma does to our memory." When he didn't remember details to an event, she "didn't press." As she explained, "I was able to rely on, let's say footage from a massacre or footage from a car bomb, in order to go, 'I can look at those things, I can describe them, and spare him that potential ... retraumatizing, that retriggering of these really scary sensory things that maybe should be left buried.'"

While Yeung took such care in crafting her own role so as to enable al Rabeeah to be in control of his process of storytelling, to support his "emotional journey" and his ownership over his experience, al Rabeeah also demonstrated care in relation to Yeung's engagement with records of violent situations. Yeung told a story that she still found remarkable and remarkably moving, of "one of the most jarring moments in our whole interview process," when al Rabeeah demonstrated protectiveness of her in approaching graphic evidence of a violent event:

There was this one moment where it occurred to Bakr, "Oh, I can show you videos of this." Because there's these YouTube videos

about people with their cell phones documenting what's happening. And the very first time this happened, I remember that moment so much, because he had it cued up, and paused on my computer screen in my office. It was winter, it was dark, and he looks at me with just the sweetest expression, and he's like, "Are you sure, Miss? It's OK." And I was like, "What do you mean?" And he's like, "Because there's gross stuff, with blood and stuff." ... That role reversal, of my student wanting to protect me.

As an educator, she was struck by "that role reversal, of my student wanting to protect me"; she "was so deeply disturbed and saddened that these things happened to kids," that she was emboldened to sometimes include mention of additional contexts of situations that people faced in Syria in order "to use Bakr's story to educate people" about what was happening.

The publication history of *Homes* underscores Yeung's warning that her collaboration with Abu Bakr should not be taken as a model that can be replicated in the classroom. When we asked her, "What would you say to educators who want to do this?" she explained why she is not especially supportive of modelling an assignment on the *Homes* project: "If you've assigned something, it doesn't feel like [students] have a choice, and [perhaps] they're not ready to talk about something, but they have this kind of internal background of, 'I need to do this because this authority figure is telling me I need to do this.'" She concluded, "We can't force a person's hand" in that way, because "if the story-teller ... isn't ready for that, we're going to re-traumatize them!" The other practical aspect that Yeung stressed as important for teachers to bear in mind is that "there's a lot of emotional support pieces that need to be in place. I am not enough of a superhero teacher to be able to do that for all of my students, so I wouldn't want to give it as an assignment to everybody to do this." Instead, she encourages teachers to "offer students choices. If they want to talk about it, if they want to write about it, that's the open invitation." But even when writing or talking about trauma is the student's own choice, it is crucial to have resources and time available to help the student work through what arises during the writing process.

Central to the role of the adult collaborator, then, is attention to such ethical principles founded on an understanding of trauma and youth. This was the foundation of the "trust relationship" that developed between Yeung and al Rabeeah and his family, in which they appeared to feel safe sharing their story and setting boundaries, either in the moment or retroactively. As Yeung explained, she assured them from the beginning that "If you're in the moment and you tell me something and then, in the moment or days, months later, you decide, 'Whoops, I don't want that known,'" then, "If you don't want it in the book ... it was not going to be in the book." If she thought something al Rabeeah had told her was really important, they'd have a conversation: "Hey, I know you said no, but I want you to think about this. It helps educate and helps people paint a better understanding of what was going on.

How do you feel about it?' Then it was a conversation." But the final decision was always his. Yeung also felt that their mode of collaboration usefully interrupts the "myth of 'Why can't immigrants learn English faster,' because it's so hard. They don't magically write a book overnight."

In Smith's analysis of Victorian "partnerships that provide creative thresholds where both adults and children can meet" (261), she analyses the intergenerational collaboration between Robert Louis Stevenson and his stepson Lloyd Osbourne and concludes that "the pair acknowledged but manipulated the roles usually assigned to adult and child in ways that grant Osbourne creative agency" (34). Based on our study of the publication history of *Homes*, we conclude that Yeung and al Rabeeah were also able to meet on a similarly "creative threshold" where the young storyteller found genuine creative agency, and the intergenerational authorship that proceeded through collaboration and connection between the younger and the older person resulted in a valuable process and text which holds lessons for others. *Homes* results from the fact that for al Rabeeah as storyteller and Yeung as writer, as Yeung indicated in our interview, "It was always a conversation between us." The products of such genuine conversations between co-creators challenge us to acknowledge young storytellers like al Rabbeah as juvenile *artists*, even if they are not juvenile *authors*; and the fact that children seeking to tell stories about trauma often need and deserve significant support, as Yeung pointed out, also suggests that, when it comes to trauma narratives in particular, scholars of juvenilia may need to apply sensitive and fluid definitions to child writing and child agency.

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