

Student Success. An Interview with Collette Murray

Editorial

Welcome to the eighth volume of *Revue YOUR Review (RYR)*, an academic journal celebrating undergraduate student research. The journal is an opportunity for York University (Toronto) undergraduate students to experience the process of writing, revising, and editing their research work for publication in a refereed academic journal. As a new member of the *RYR* editorial board, I know what the editing and revising experience is like from an editor's perspective, but I was curious to hear more about the experience from a student perspective. In April 2021, I met with one of this journal's first student-authors, Collette Murray, who completed a guided writing experience with us in 2015.

Featured in the second volume of *RYR*, Murray's article, "Altered Beauty: African-Caribbean Women Decolonizing Racialized Aesthetics in Toronto, Canada," uses Critical Race Theory to examine the everyday racism of Black beauty standards and decolonial strategies. At the time, Murray was an undergraduate student in York University's Bachelor of Arts in Race, Ethnicity and Indigeneity program, and completing a Certificate in Anti-Racist Research and Practice. Murray went on to obtain a Master of Education at York University and is now a doctoral candidate in Dance Studies. She also has a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from the University of Toronto. Over the years, Murray has balanced work and studies. She has served three York University faculties as a fulltime, non-academic employee, and is currently Graduate Program Assistant for both the Critical Disability Studies and the Health Policy & Equity graduate programs. A community-engaged artist and contributing writer to *The Dance Current* and *Dance Collection Danse*, Murray was happy to speak with us about her guided experience in writing and publishing and its influence on her educational and career paths.

In 2014, Murray, who is of Guyanese descent, wrote a term paper inspired by her own experience with hair texture and skin shade, and explored ties to beauty standards in the Black Canadian community, internalized colonialism, and anti-racist strategies. That year, she presented her research at York University's second annual

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Undergraduate Research Fair. Winning the Research Fair award for best poster and presentation encouraged Murray to take her work to the next stage and share it further.

The *RYR* editorial board invited all Undergraduate Research Fair presenters to shape their work into an article and submit it to this journal for consideration for publication. Most undergraduates have never pursued this step in the research process and, initially, it can seem intimidating. “Your work goes through the peer-review process, and you don’t know what that process entails or how your work will be received, so you are anxious,” said Murray. Prospective authors attend a writing-for-publication workshop organized by the journal’s editorial board to help them understand the revision process.

After her paper passed the first stage of peer review and was conditionally accepted, the editorial team partnered Murray with a faculty writing coach to help her revise her submission for publication. In editing her essay, Murray learned that she had to “contextualize my personal, life-embodied experience because the reader may not deal with it on a day-to-day basis. It’s about articulating the argument and clarifying a phenomenon. How can I clarify an internalized process? You don’t have to explain it to individuals who have that lived experience, but you have to make that conversation explicit so that others can understand and learn from it.” Her writing coach helped her expand the background and context and adapt her writing for a general academic audience.

These skills proved to be very useful when a national dance magazine invited Murray to write a column on a dance performance that teemed with stereotypical misrepresentation and cultural appropriation. To ensure that critical sections explaining the racial insensitivity of the performance weren’t edited out due to word count limits, Murray engaged in several conversations with the magazine’s editor. She said it was thanks to the back-and-forth experience of revising, with a supportive writing coach from *RYR*, that she “had the confidence to do that negotiation.”

Publishing her research in *RYR* also validated Murray’s decision to collect and analyze other experiences of those in Toronto’s Black community. In “Altered Beauty” (2015), Murray experimented with the interview methodology she’d learned about in class. Her article helped fill a void in the literature that, otherwise, focused predominantly on an American perspective. “What was happening within the Toronto space was different,” said Murray. “There wasn’t much written on hair and skin shade within Latin American communities in Canada, so it was important for me to write about the Canadian experience.”

A few years later, Murray noticed another gap in the scholarly literature and again she conducted oral interviews—this time, for her master’s work on African, Caribbean, and Black arts educators working with diverse school populations in Ontario, Canada. Murray plans to use interviews once again in her current doctoral research, which will document the history of African-Canadian diasporic dance companies and choreographers who, beginning in the 1970s, created their own

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mentorship networks and spaces for cultural dance education. This pattern—of filling scholarly gaps by gathering evidence rather than building on pre-existing literature—repeats throughout Murray’s research experience, and echoes that of many undergraduate students and aspiring scholars who wish to academically engage with their own lived experiences in communities historically excluded from the scholarly landscape. The extra labour needed to overcome such obstacles monopolizes valuable time and energy, which could otherwise be dedicated to research and community contributions.

Murray nonetheless finds time for her own community-engaged artistic practice. Known as Miss Coco in the dance world, she runs a mobile dance education business that highlights the history and social practice of cultural dances from the African and Caribbean diasporas, through performances, workshops, and instruction. She is also the artistic director of Coco Collective, an intergenerational, multidisciplinary arts collective that operates across Canada. To help secure funding for her artistic endeavours and award-winning community projects, Murray draws on the communication skills she developed through her writing-for-publication experiences to convey the importance of her work to broader audiences and to prepare successful grant applications. In 2019, the Toronto Arts Foundation awarded Murray the Neighbourhood Arts Network Community Arts Award, a \$10,000 cash prize celebrating her significant contributions to community arts.

Reflecting on our conversation and on Murray’s incredible achievements, I now see how students can continue to develop and apply skills fostered during their guided writing experience with our journal to future successes, such as pursuing graduate studies or mobilizing endeavours in their communities. *Revue YOUR Review* offers a unique opportunity for experiential learning in writing and publishing to undergraduate student-authors at York. This year, it’s especially important to celebrate the inspiring perseverance of contributors to this issue of *RYR*, who transformed their class essays into academic articles under the challenging circumstances of a global pandemic. Warmest congratulations to all our authors on achieving this milestone in their educational journey.

Katrina Cohen-Palacios
Editorial Board Member, *Revue YOUR Review*
Archivist, Clara Thomas Archives & Special Collections
York University Libraries
Toronto, Canada

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