



Q&A

The WRITER'S STUDIO with Kelly Lytle Hernández

Gabriel García Márquez liked to surround himself with his creature comforts—an electric typewriter and a good meal. Toni Morrison began at sunrise with a cup of coffee, a yellow legal pad, and a no. 2 pencil. James Baldwin waited to start writing until after everyone else had gone to bed. Historians, too, have special ways of working that are worth sharing. In Summer 2022, Thomas G. Andrews and Brooke L. Blower asked the MacArthur Fellow and Pulitzer Prize Board member Kelly Lytle Hernández about what she values in her own writing and others'.

Hernández is a professor of history, African American studies, and urban planning at UCLA, where she holds the Thomas E. Lifka Endowed Chair in History and is the director of the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies. She is the author of the award-winning books, *Migra! A History of the U.S. Border Patrol* (University of California Press, 2010) and *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles* (University of North Carolina Press, 2017). Her latest book is *Bad Mexicans: Race, Empire, and Revolution in the Borderlands* (W. W. Norton, 2022), which was just awarded a Bancroft Prize.

Tell us about how you usually write. Do you have any special techniques for getting words onto the page (special places, favorite times of the day, curious habits, etc.)?

I write in the mornings, as early as possible, after working out but before I do anything else with my day. This is when my mind is most clear: after exercise, before administration. Ideally, I can write all day, between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. Every now and then I am able to do this—in summer, on sabbatical, when my kids are alright—but a typical writing block looks more like 7 a.m. to 10 a.m. I block this time on my calendar and often reserve longer periods on Friday mornings. I've learned not to let work meetings creep into this time. These are my two most important writing habits: exercise and time. The third habit is fashion. I prefer to write in grungy mismatched sweatsuits. It's all about being comfortable, cozy, and ready to rumble with the page.

Did you grow up with lots of books? When did you start writing?

Yes. I grew up surrounded by books. I don't know how far back the love of books stretches in my family, but my grandfather, Lacey Lytle, a Garveyite and janitor in the New York City public library system, was the elder I most remember as promoting a life of study. His friends called him "Fess," short for professor. His knowledge was expansive. His intellect was sharp. And his impact was palpable on my father and his ten siblings. Across our family, everybody reads, especially books about African American history, culture, and politics. My Aunt Alice also got into British monarchy histories. I'm not sure but I think she liked to giggle about royals wilding out. She taught me that reading could be fun.

In *Migra!*, you thank your mother for teaching you how to write. We'd love to hear more about that.

My mother taught me to write. She believed in the power of storytelling, and ran her own revise-and-resubmit process with all my papers as far back as I can recall. With a pen in her

hand, writing her notes in the margins, she advised me to be clear, direct, and bold because writing is a powerful tool. With her, there were no hard lines between exposition, argument, and storytelling. I recently came across an essay I wrote in high school. I'm pretty sure it's better than anything I wrote in grad school, when I felt so much pressure to bury her lessons, namely her insistence on clarity. That pressure did not come from faculty advisors but from the world of academic texts I was consuming. I held tight to what she poured into me and have spent my career trying to honor what she taught me about communicating an idea as clearly and broadly as possible.

Which writers do you most admire and why?

James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, of course, are writers I greatly admire. They unravel stories. For me, reading Baldwin is like reading a perfect circle. I can only understand the beginning by getting all the way to the end, and that understanding grows deeper every time I read his work. For me, reading Morrison is like walking neck-deep through layers of emotion, history, and relationships. Each layer has its own texture, and it's the combination of textures through which any one layer makes any sense. Her writing is incomparably, beautifully thick.

What does it take for a sentence to satisfy you?

Clarity.

Do you outline?

Yes. I first doodle a bubble map on a legal pad. A bubble map is a way of outlining an essay. The main idea is placed in a large, central bubble with lines to smaller surrounding bubbles for supporting ideas. Connected to each supporting idea is another set of bubbles, each one with a single piece of evidence. When the bubble map is complete, I place each piece of evidence on a three-by-five card and tape the cards on the wall in front of my desk. I lump, link, and plot the cards until I have a roadmap for the argument and story I want to tell. Then, I sit down at a desk in front of the wall and write, using the roadmap on the wall to guide me through the chapter.

What do you do when you get stuck?

Well, at the beginning of any project, I'm always stuck. For me, there's nothing more scary than staring at the blank page. I need time to just put words on the page. Even with a roadmap of cards taped on the wall in front of me, my thoughts are still messy. At this stage, my sentences really stink and I feel dependent on a thesaurus just to find any words worth typing down.

But this is all part of the process. I've learned that I just need to engage this wretched early phase to be able to move on. There's no getting around it, just through it.

After a couple days of really bad writing, things begin to come together. In other words, every bad writing day is one day closer to clarity. I've learned to embrace these frustrating days.

I've also learned to embrace the revise-and-resubmit process. Typically, I send my work out for review when it's still quite rough. Of course, this is not the kindest thing to ask of reviewers but getting feedback early in the writing process is helpful to me. So, once I have a completed a manuscript I tend to send it out for review.

When I get stuck in the writing process, especially when working on the final revisions, I usually take a nap. Rather than bang my head against the wall, I go to sleep and try again later. A little sleep is often what I need to get my mind right.

Finally, I write best when listening to music. If possible, I'll listen to music from the era and communities I'm writing about. If not, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* has been my go-to since graduate school.

In *City of Inmates* you talk about uncovering a “rebel archive” to tell the history of incarceration in Los Angeles. What kind of research methods have helped you locate unconventional sources, lost caches of documents, and other material for your work?

I think it's important to be endlessly curious. Curiosity has pushed me to chase down unconventional leads, even when—maybe even especially when—I harbor doubts as to where they might end. To satisfy my curiosity, I often reserve time in the archives to snap hundreds of photos of files I have nothing more than a hunch about. Typically, these are files that seem tangentially related to my research topic. When I get home, I carefully read through these files because reading through them provides me with greater context to my research.

Sometimes, these records force me to reconsider the boundaries of my subject. For example, when researching *Bad Mexicans*, which is about a group of Mexican revolutionaries working in the U.S.–Mexico borderlands during the early twentieth century, I read hundreds of files from U.S. consular officials stationed along the border. The consular records provided extensive insight into U.S. interests in the borderlands and the myriad of rebellions they confronted, large and small. This broader landscape of U.S. power and Mexican revolt helped me to better understand my subject matter, even though I never directly used many of those files.

I think it also helps to be stubborn. For *City of Inmates*, when the LAPD and LASD told me they did not have or would not share their historical records, it only made me more determined to find a way into the story. I'm stubborn that way. So, I worked around the LAPD and LASD by looking for the records of any person or organization that ever set foot in a Los Angeles jail, eventually finding a bigger story than I had ever imagined.

How do you organize all the data you uncover? How does your research process impact your writing process?

I obsessively digitize and upload most of my primary sources to Zotero. I like Zotero because I can tag items with keywords and link notes directly to primary and secondary sources. But, most of all, I like Zotero because as long as I have my laptop with me, I have my archive with me, allowing me to write anywhere. This is helpful because I like to write on planes and in hotel rooms.

My dependence on digitized records has brought ups and downs. Prior to the COVID-19 shutdown, I had uploaded a considerable number of primary sources to Zotero. Therefore, when archives closed down, I was able to continue researching and writing, completing my most recent book, *Bad Mexicans*, in 2021. However, I once goofed a backup and am still reconstructing my Zotero library.

Your books rely heavily on Spanish-language sources. How do you approach translation in your research and writing?

Cautiously. I can read books and primary sources in Spanish and am fairly confident in my own translations. Still, I am not bilingual and always hire a translator to double check my translations. It's often fun to talk over the translations since translation is about communicating meaning as much as interpreting words.

My favorite translation thus far is a simple one, and it is in *Bad Mexicans*. One of the rebels writes that he is committed to instigating revolution in Mexico “por todos medios,” just three short words that strictly translate to “by all means.” But to invoke a broader history of radical uprisings and to communicate to a contemporary, diverse audience the oppositional position this rebel had taken in relationship to revolutionary violence, I translate “por todos medios” as “by any means necessary,” the now-iconic phrase used by Franz Fanon and Malcolm X to assert that violence was a legitimate means of revolt. I felt this translation more accurately communicated the author’s intensity, sentiment, and method to a U.S. audience.

There is a clear progression in your scholarship, with each book you’ve written flowing out of and expanding upon the previous one. With *Bad Mexicans*, though, you’ve moved from working with academic presses to a trade press. What struck you as the biggest—and most surprising—aspects of writing for a trade audience and working with trade-oriented editors?

I really enjoyed writing *Bad Mexicans*. It was a new challenge in several ways. First, I could not presume readers were coming to the book with a shared knowledge base. Some would know quite a bit about Mexican and Mexican American history, but most would not. Therefore, I had to provide a strong and steady foundation for all readers to share before moving into the meat of the book. This foundation became a well I could draw from throughout the book to convey succinctly the stakes of the story. Second, I was able to lean into the pace and arc of the story, honoring the drama of the magonistas’ rebellion with a cinematic structure—set up, confrontation, resolution—and robust characters. Writing this history according to a more cinematic structure was a tool I used to introduce new readers to Mexican American and borderlands history.

I also think there is an assumption in the academy that narrative nonfiction is a light-weight approach to history writing. I found this to be untrue. In particular, I found myself having to pay a higher level of attention to personalities, emotions, and relationships. In the end, I enjoyed the challenge of maintaining rigor while enlivening and humanizing the history.

***Bad Mexicans*, unlike your previous works, relies on short chapters (there are twenty-five, as you know, in a book that runs a bit over 300 pages). What prompted this decision, and how did it change your writing?**

My editor told me that writing a book can be like designing a good video game. You have to give the reader rewards along the way. Finishing a chapter is a reward. So, in many cases, I made individual stories into chapters, slowly piecing together larger arguments across the book sections.

What kind of readers do you find most helpful as draft readers? What is your revision process?

Honest readers. I need folks who will challenge me by pointing out flaws, small and large. This kind of feedback inspires me, and I get a lot of it because I tend to share my work when it’s still pretty messy. Getting feedback on early drafts is like rocket fuel that helps propel my writing to the next stage.

What do you try to teach your students—especially your graduate students—about writing?

First: the goal of writing is to communicate an idea (and even a feeling), and you haven't succeeded until people understand you. So don't try to sound smart. Instead, work to be clear.

Second: you don't know where you are going until you get there. Allow your ideas to change as you write. Then, go back and revise everything as if you knew the story from the beginning.

Third: Embrace the revision process. It often takes countless revisions to express an idea, and even more revisions to string a set of ideas together.

What kind of historical stories do we need more of right now?

I know what stories I need right now. I like stories about radical solidarity within and across communities—stories about people who defy rules, traditions, hierarchies, and expectations to choose one another. I don't really care what time period or place the book is about. I just like stories about what happens when we choose each other, again and again and again.