

Keeping It Personal: A Conversation on the Importance of Self in a GWRJ Article

Alicia Shupe and Janine Blue

In this interview transcribed from an episode of the “Conversations with GWRJ Authors” podcast series, Alicia Shupe talks with Janine Blue about how she came up with the idea for her GWRJ article “Manic Panic: When You’re Not a ‘Natural’ Rainbowhead.” Shupe shares how they researched such a personal topic of discussion and why everyone can start writing a GWRJ article by looking inward.

How does a *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* article come together? According to GWRJ author Alicia Shupe, the answer is using antecedent knowledge as a first step, doing content and genre research of GWRJ articles, and simply having fun along the way. In this transcript of an interview from the podcast series “Conversations with GWRJ Authors,” Janine Blue interviews Alicia about her article-writing practices and emphasizes the significance of making GWRJ articles personal. Her thoughtful and engaging responses show us that nothing is more important in an article than the person telling the story and that enjoyment is essential to writing and research practices.

Janine Blue: Hello, and welcome to the series “Conversations with GWRJ Authors.” Today, we are speaking with Alicia Shupe about her article “Manic Panic: When You’re Not a ‘Natural’ Rainbowhead.” In this article, Alicia discusses the concept of reading people in the same ways that we might read genres, especially as it extends to hair, makeup, and other creative forms of self-expression. She explores the importance of genre analysis and genre conventions and how we all use critical thinking in concert with antecedent knowledge to read people, much

like we might read a text. It's fascinating, colorful, and such a unique idea. Alicia, thank you so much for being here.

Alicia Shupe: Absolutely, Janine. Thrilled to be here. Thanks for having me.

Janine: Yeah, absolutely. So, just to kick things off, how exactly did you come up with the idea for your article?

Alicia: You know, it's funny. It was something Dr. Joyce Walker said to us in the fall of 2021, my first semester [at Illinois State University], and I will completely blow this quote because it's been a minute since then. But she and Dr. Gramer encouraged us to choose a topic that fascinates and energizes us or that we have enough curiosity to research and revise consistently. That notion reminded me of this paper I'd written as an undergrad on how women with tattoos are perceived. A lot of my work comes from a place of me fighting back against accusations that have been levied at me, especially as a millennial female with, you know, punk hair and tattoos and all the rest of it. So that same feeling of indignation at the idea that anyone would feel entitled to an opinion about me, my hair, or my tattoos flared up and inspired this piece.

Janine: I love how you got your idea from your own life. That's what's so great about the *Grassroots* journal. All the articles are about people in their lives, the things they care about, and things that matter to them. It's great that you wanted to talk about yourself, in a way, in this article. So, how did you decide what ISU Writing Program terms to rely on to connect to your article?

“**Genres** are typified responses to recurring social situations. Often, when we talk about genres, we include so many different kinds of written texts (... text messages we send every day, the forms we fill out to apply to colleges and jobs), seeing them as recognizable responses to recurring situations (... communicating with friends and family, wanting to attend college or get a job) that accomplish specific social action in the world (... we feel connected, we get paid)” (“Genre Research Terms”).

Alicia: Oh, my gosh, pure coincidence and serendipitous timing. It's really difficult for me to write anything without a personal perspective. One of the things that makes writing so much more interesting for me is trying to work out, you know, where I am and how I feel about things. And I was teaching [ENG] 101 and taking [ENG] 402 at the same time I was writing this article, so **genre** was on my mind fairly consistently. But what really sealed it is that I was walking down the stairs in the University Street garage, and I passed another faculty member, an older gentleman. Just after we passed each other, he called back to me, “I like your hair,” with the most

genuine enthusiasm in his voice. It caught me off guard, and as soon as I realized that it caught me off guard, I began to question why I'd read this lovely man as someone who was likely to judge me in two seconds, just a quick glance. And he'd read me, too, but differently than I'd assumed. And so that was the seed for the piece. After that, it was a matter of considering which learning outcomes would work together with genre and why.

Janine: That is such a striking thing to say. That you had this moment in your real life with someone, and how just the feeling you got from it inspired you to write your article. That is just so powerful and moving. What did your writing practices look like as you were writing your article?

Alicia: Like my typical writing practice: which is a lot of thinking and pacing, talking to myself, revising, and then revising again. I also took a lot of [**genre analysis**] clues from reading the *Grassroots* journal ... in the fall of 2021, paying close attention to the way authors had to use anecdotes and tone (Figure 1). More than anything, I was nervous about sounding like I was writing for a textbook. So, I wanted to think of this article more as a genre lesson [for writers] than as a required class reading. I wanted it to be something [people] could engage with and feel like I was talking to them, not at them.

Janine: Yes, exactly! Again, you're just saying amazing things that connect to the journal because it's not like a typical textbook that you spend hundreds of dollars on that's got all these different critical analyses from all of these, you know, older scholars—people you've never heard of. It is, you know, a journal about humanity. It is about real people, who they are, and what they like to research. I'm glad you could connect who you are to your topic for the journal. So, what kind of research did you end up doing? Any sort of activity or genre research? Maybe content or topic research?

Alicia: I leaned heavily on my **antecedent knowledge** at first. I've been dyeing my hair rainbow colors since 2010. At this point, I've had quite a bit of experience with other people giving unsolicited opinions, making jokes, asking invasive questions, “reading” me basically, in both

“**Genre analysis** is the practice of breaking down what we see people doing in specific texts in a genre, and it is a part of doing genre research. When we do genre analysis, we describe the relationships between visible genre features (length, structure, formatting, different modes, language use) and the social goals of those features, including their cultural-historical contexts in specific times and places” (“Genre Research Terms”).



Figure 1: Scan this QR code to check out the Fall 2021 GWRJ, issue 12.1, that Alicia used to do genre research.

Antecedent knowledge

Antecedent knowledge refers to the facts, information, and skills that we each bring with us into familiar and new-to-us situations (“Uptake Terms”). In this case, Alicia is including previous embodied experiences with being “read” as a person because of hair styles and colors.

Content research

“Content research is the practice of seeking, finding, and processing information from a variety of places. When we talk about content research, we often focus on the activity of researching content for texts or artifacts that we will be writing, including evaluating all information, citing and attributing information ethically, and recognizing all research as someone’s writing for a particular writing situation” (“Content Research Terms”).

senses of that term. [**Reading**, here, refers to an interpretation of genre in that these folks were looking at me and my hair and deciding based off those brief interactions what kind of person I may be and how they could trust or engage with me. However, reading here also refers to how the term is used in Black and queer circles, such as with drag families, where reading is defined as naming the ways in which a family member can be found lacking or deficient. A “read” in this context is a sharp criticism that leaves nothing to doubt regarding the ways in which a family member is lacking aesthetically or practically.]

Once I thought the idea through, I knew the **content research** had to focus on why [this experience kept happening]. I knew why it bothered me, but why did these folks do this and say this? So, with those research questions in mind, and of course, understanding that any answers I turned up would be generalized, I flew down the Google rabbit hole looking for origins of colored hair and then looking for connections between that history and the social-cultural context for acceptance or rejection.

Janine: Wow, that sounds like a cool process. You’re talking about how you started with antecedent

knowledge, and that’s something that we don’t talk about enough in research in general. You can start with what you already know: your history, your past, and how you feel about the topic. Sometimes in school, we think about research, as you know, primary sources, using JSTOR, and all these other things. But what you already know from your experience is the most powerful point of starting research you can have. So that’s just great that you’re talking about that.

Alicia: Absolutely. This article doesn’t exist without my history.

Janine: As we’re talking about how personal the research was for you, I want to add that the *Grassroots* team was very excited to have your pictures in color. We [don’t print all] pictures in color, but your article is such a visual piece that there is no way we could have an article about rainbows and color and not have it be in color. How did you decide what hair photos to use for this article?

Alicia: It was really exciting for me to have the distinction of being the one article in color. Oddly enough, the particular decision of which pictures was one of the more organic decisions I had to make for this process. I'm very much a writer who discovers as I draft, so the pictures came about as a result of the points in my life that fit the story and the lesson I was trying to weave. Each time I remembered something that had been said to me or a moment that I felt particularly strong as a result of the way I looked in the mirror, I'd note that in my writing and then check my camera roll for proof. To be fair, though, knowing images are a *Grassroots* **genre convention** likely shaped which moment sprang to mind while I was writing as well.

Genre Conventions

“Genre conventions refer to the characteristics of any kind of text that make it recognizable as participating in a particular genre. When we identify genre conventions, we include genre features that might be visible (length, structure, formatting, different modes in use, language use, tone, content included, citing or attributing information) and social goals that we more likely have to infer (why these elements, valued by whom, toward what purposes” (“Genre Research Terms”).

Janine: Yeah, your article has amazing pictures with all these colors, which is fascinating. We're so happy you're willing to share those pictures with us. These intimate moments of your life where, as you said, you had various reactions. You had different feelings about how people spoke to you and how you thought about yourself. So, we're honored that you shared that part of your life with us. Another question I want to ask you is what you remember about your interactions with the *Grassroots* editorial team. And did editorial feedback shape your article in any way and the published version of your piece?

Alicia: Oh, of course. I was more than a little surprised that the team received this work so warmly, not because of who was on the team, although they're all amazing, lovely, wonderful humans. Shout out to the *Grassroots* team!

Janine: Aww, thank you very much for saying that, Alicia.

Alicia: No problem, it's true. But I think it was because there is so much personal history in this piece, and I had such mixed feelings as these moments of my life were happening. And even as I was writing them, those feelings were coming back up. And so, to see that connect with the team in such a big way and have such an enthusiastic, encouraging response about taking it into publication, I think, was surprising for me but a welcomed surprise. As far as shaping the piece, I think what I remember most about the editorial process is the balance between revision notes and authorial autonomy. As far as I recall, the revision

notes always came back with a tone like, “Hey, we suggest you could do this, but we trust you,” and that was just such a good feeling as a writer, especially for a first publication, to have my work seen and valued for the voice that was already present. I definitely learned to trust myself more during this process. And because of the team’s feedback.

Janine: Oh, that is just wonderful to hear because, definitely at *Grassroots*, we never want to take autonomy away. We never want to change an author’s voice. All we want to do is suggest how to improve the piece. And we’re just so excited when people submit their pieces, and they’re about all these unique and interesting things. We never want to take away from people’s lives, what they want to write about, or what they have to say. Again, we want to help you polish it a bit or give you suggestions on how to expand on certain things. But yes, we never want to take away anyone’s voice. Because as we’ve been talking about, the *Grassroots* journal is a journal of different voices and experiences. So, I’m glad you felt empowered and trusted yourself when working with the editorial team because that’s exactly what we want every author to feel when they submit their piece and we work with them.

Alicia: Absolutely. The team is fantastic.

Janine: Great, great. So, moving along, what surprised you about your *Grassroots* article research and writing experience overall?

Alicia: How quickly it went and how far back the roots of colored hair history go. I wasn’t expecting to find out that women were coloring their hair the same rose pink I used in 2020 back in 1920. That was surprising. I, of course, knew that there were roots to the punk movement and even, you know, some of the like sub-glam rock movements back in the 1970s. But seeing that this went back to the beginning of the 20th century was both empowering and surprising because there was part of me that was like, “See you! We’ve been doing this for 100 years!” Which was exciting as a natural rainbowhead. But, at the same time, it also showed how slowly cultural understandings tend to evolve that, 100 years later, I’m still having these conversations about, you know, whether this is an OK choice for me to make for myself.

Janine: Yes, I was surprised, too, when I saw that in your article about how far back women coloring their hair went. I was like, “Where is this in all the history books?” and “Why aren’t we talking more about, you know, the cool pink and blue hair that these women would don?” I agree with the fact that, 100 years ago, this was still happening. But even now, there’s still this apprehension of “How will I be perceived?” That says so much about culture and how slowly things can move but, at the same

time, how punk women have always been. So yeah, again, that's just another empowering thing. It's just knowing how far back hair dyeing went, which was just so cool. OK, so, Alicia, my last question for you today: What advice would you give to people who'd like to write an article for the journal?

Alicia: There are a few things that I would say. First of all, go with your gut. If it's something you find fascinating, your audience will feel that and appreciate it. And, of course, the opposite is true as well. If you are bored with this, that will translate into your writing, and that's something I tell [undergraduate writers]. So, I would give that same advice to anybody writing for the journal. The other thing is to give yourself some room to play. Try not to take yourself or the piece too seriously because that can also drain the life and the fun from your writing, from the piece, from the research. And choose something that you can live with for a while and revise because, obviously, if you choose something that you're going to be bored with within a week, both of those other points will just, you know, be in conflict. You won't feel the same playfulness or life or fascination with it.

Janine: Again, you're saying such amazing, wonderful things. I do agree to write something that you enjoy. Again, we think about critical texts and English textbooks that are 400 pages long, and it's all this dense material you have to read. But the *Grassroots* journal is, again, just stories of people's lives. And if you're going to write an article, you might as well write about something fun or that you care about and that you won't mind having edited and worked on for a draft or two. I also tell [undergraduate writers] to write about things they care about because, believe it or not, that's what matters most: if you're enjoying what you're writing about. Sure, you can write something you don't care about and muddle through the process, but why not choose a topic that will actually make you enjoy the writing process? That's the most important thing, I think.

Alicia: 100% agree. Yeah, tell me the story and why I should care about this.

Janine: Absolutely. So, thank you for being with us, Alicia. Once again, the *Grassroots* team thanks Alicia Shupe for participating in today's interview, and be sure to check out her article "Manic Panic: When You're Not a 'Natural' Rainbowhead" reprinted in this issue of the *Grassroots Writing Research Journal*, or in the original print in GWRJ 13.2. Alicia, thank you so much for today. I've loved talking to you; you've just had the most amazing things to say. So, we're glad that you're here with us.

Alicia: Anytime. Thanks, Janine.

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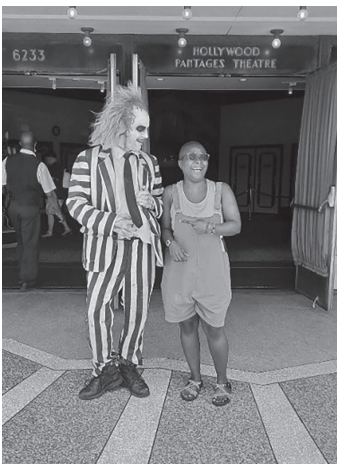
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Alicia Shupe is a PhD student in creative writing (fiction) at Illinois State University. Her research interests include feminist theory, trauma, and the telling (or not telling) of women’s stories. When she isn’t writing her own fiction, she’s probably watching “Grey’s Anatomy” on Netflix (again).



Since writing “Making Sense of All the Writing: My Embodied Literate Activity” for the 14.2 GWRJ issue, there still has not been much change for **Janine Blue**. She’s still learning, teaching, and writing. She still uses her weighted blanket and enjoys simulation games. She did recently receive an extremely cool purple fidget spinner and caught up on some reading.