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To Boldly Go

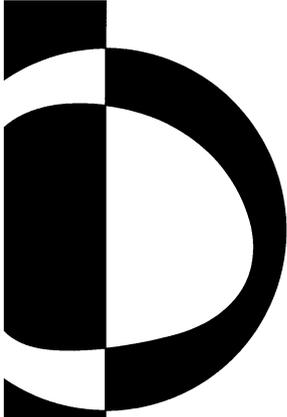
Paula Gillespie

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Paula Gillespie

To Boldly Go¹

fron·tier

ˈfrɒnˈtɪr/

noun

noun: **frontier**; plural noun: **frontiers**

1. a line or border separating two countries.

synonyms: border, boundary, borderline, dividing line, demarcation line;

- the district near a border separating two countries.
- the extreme limit of settled land beyond which lies wilderness, especially referring to the western US before Pacific settlement.
- the extreme limit of understanding or achievement in a particular area
(<http://www.bing.com/search?q=frontier%20definition&pc=cosp&ptag=N0588G1481D011016A316A5D3C6E&-form=CONBDF&conlogo=CT3210127>).

¹ This keynote was delivered at the International Writing Centers Association conference on October 14, 2016.

When Brad Hughes told me the title of his keynote speech at the Midwest Writing Centers Association conference last March, I was fascinated and asked him about it. His title was “Writing Center Moonshots,” and he promised to tell me more. A few weeks ago he published a version of his talk on his University of Wisconsin–Madison blog, “Another Word,” and I recommend that you look it up! Brad says,

[Moonshots] are really ambitious goals—or the process of trying to achieve those kinds of goals. The term refers to US President John Kennedy’s 1961 speech, at Rice University in Houston, about space exploration, when Kennedy boldly promised that the United States would land a person on the moon by the end of the decade. Moonshots are really audacious projects, ones that are, in fact, so difficult that they are unlikely to succeed. As Kennedy said in that now famous speech: “We choose to go to the Moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard.”

Brad’s talk urges us to think of our writing center work as moonshots and to dare to try some things we might consider audacious.



Photo Credit: Cole Pike & Leigh Pike

My talk today will be a reflection on two metaphors for our work, moonshots and frontiers, the theme of our meeting. A look at our conference program shows us a rich collection of stories of writing centered frontiers approached and conquered, of moonshots, past, present, and

future. Both terms are useful, I think, as a way of reflecting on our work.

For months, ever since I was asked to give this talk, I have been obsessed with the term “frontier.” I visited a number of frontiers: Manhattan, Kansas, Manhattan, New York, Columbus, Georgia, Kansas City, and Puerto Rico, all of which were referred to as frontiers in their literature. I looked at the history of my own community, Coconut Grove, Florida, the forerunner of Miami. Yep. It was the frontier. I began to see geographical frontiers wherever I looked.

Most poignant, though, and most compelling to me was my reflection on my home town of Buffalo, New York and of how I came to know a different kind of history than I was taught in school.

Many of you have Native American roots and you will be familiar with the stories I’m going to tell you; others of us live or have lived in areas with rich, complicated histories often not taught to children. Some of us have gone searching for these . . .

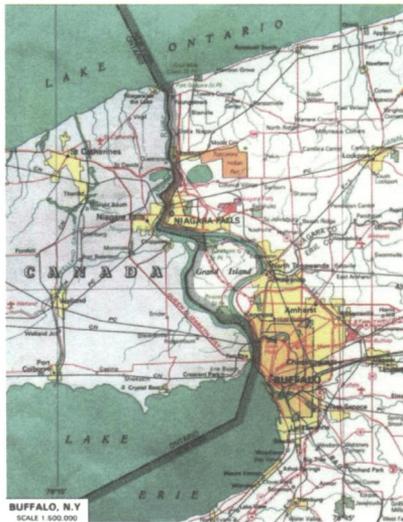


Photo Credit: https://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/world_cities/buffalo.jpg

Buffalo, New York is on the Niagara River, not far from Niagara Falls. As you cross the river to look at the falls from various angles, or if you go to downtown Buffalo and cross the Peace Bridge, you move easily from the US to Canada and back again. You cross a border, and therefore a frontier. To the west of Buffalo is Lake Erie, a formidable boundary and the source of all that lake effect snow that helps to make Buffalo famous.

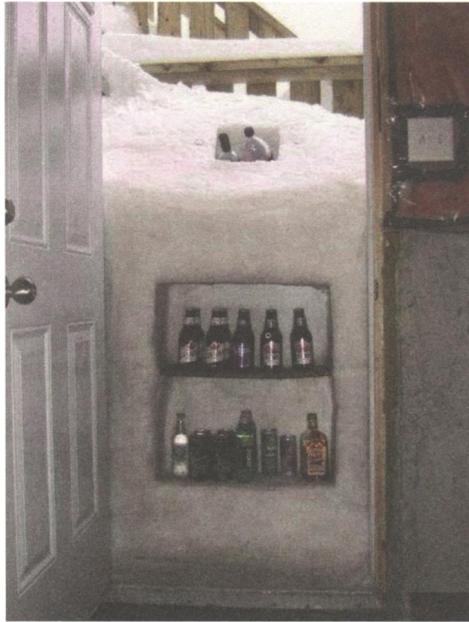


Photo Credit: Funnyjunk, <http://www.funnyjunk.com/Buffalo+lake+effect+beer+fridge/funny-pictures/5361708/>

Buffalo is within a larger area called The Niagara Frontier. We were taught, as elementary school children, that Buffalo had been America's western frontier at one point. Our public bus system was called the Niagara Frontier Transit, and since we were working class kids, that was how we got around the city. When I was a child, the name "Niagara Frontier" always got me daydreaming, imagining what it must have been like to have been one of the far western boundaries of our country, especially because Westerns of all kinds were popular in fiction, film, and television. By contrast, my city was settled, was knowable, and, in its way, was beautiful.

While I was too young to have learned from history books about the 1950s-approved version of Buffalo's history, I was learning an alternative history of my region not covered in my school's curriculum.

My dad was an avid gardener, and behind our rented upper flat, we had a big, beautiful urban garden. He and my mom had learned during the Great Depression that vegetable gardening, canning, pickling, and preserving their homegrown food helped to keep hunger away. So we had peach trees and chickens and Swiss chard and asparagus all thriving in our huge yard.

My dad was always delighted when he would discover an Indian arrowhead, as we called them then, in the overturned soil of our garden, or, rarely, he would find a stone axe, minus its handle.



Photo Credit: <http://www.kshb.com/news/science-tech/construction-workers-uneearth-10000-year-old-indian-artifacts-in-upstate-new-york>

He cleaned these treasures meticulously, showed them to us, and then he took pride in delivering them to the Buffalo Museum of Science. An organic gardener before any of us knew that term, he taught me about the Seneca people who lived where our neighborhood now stood, and how he used some of their gardening methods. It always set my mind racing to think of another culture, having lived and worked where we now did, and to know that their tools, who knows how old, lay under our feet.

Later I learned that the Seneca were not actually the first people to live where I lived, but that they had defeated other, earlier tribes, and that perhaps those others were the creators of the stone tools that delighted us all.

How does this relate to writing centers? I am getting there.

Behind our house was a very small park where my sisters and brother and I used to play, to climb crabapple trees, and where my dad gathered hickory nuts and black walnuts, enough to keep us in home-made cookies all winter. But we would learn that this park was once a sacred burial ground of the Seneca, and it has a fascinating history.

In the center of the park stands a huge granite boulder we used to climb on. It has to this day a brass plaque in the shape of a wolf skin that says,

SENECA INDIAN PARK

In this vicinity from 1780 to 1842 dwelt the larger portion of the Seneca Nation of the Iroquois League. In this enclosure were buried Red Jacket, Mary Jemison, the White Woman of the Genesee, and many of the noted chiefs and leaders of the nation whose remains have been removed and reburied elsewhere.



Photo Credit: Seneca Indian Park | Mapio.net Mapio.net1024 × 768

We were taught in school that Red Jacket was a famous chief of the Wolf tribe. What we did not know was that he and his tribe lost much of their land to the Americans because they had sided with the British during the Revolutionary War. We also did not know that Red Jacket was a famous orator. Red Jacket was his English name, but later he used the name Sagoyewatha, an honorary name bestowed in about 1780 by the Seneca Nation. This name roughly translates “He keeps them awake,” in recognition of his skills at oratory.

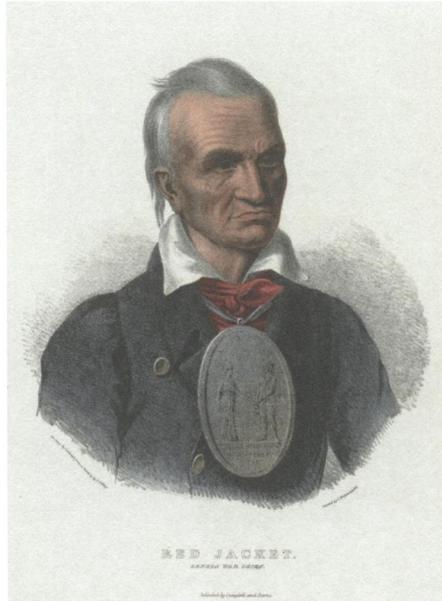


Photo Credit: Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Jacket

He became a renowned spokesperson for his people, pleading eloquently with George Washington in Philadelphia and later addressing Congress, arguing, among other things, that religious freedom should extend to indigenous tribes, allowing them to retain their religions and religious observations. He was outspoken about the way the first scraggly Europeans had been welcomed, fed, and offered land to work, were taught how to hunt for deer and bison and how to grow the local crops. But he also spoke passionately about betrayals and avarice, and pleaded for the religious freedom we now take pride in and must continue to defend.

Also originally buried in that little park behind my house was Mary Jemison, a European settler. Her family had squatted on some territory owned by the Iroquois Confederacy, and became caught up in wars and property disputes. Her entire family was seized by six Shawnee and four Frenchmen and later murdered. Mary and a neighbor boy, though, both children, were adopted and raised by the Seneca. Eventually she married a Delaware, had a son, and after she was widowed, she married a Seneca and had several children. When she was offered a chance to live among Europeans, she chose to stay with the Seneca. Later she negotiated with the Americans for a financial settlement, as

partial compensation to the Seneca Nation when they ceded their lands after the Revolutionary War.

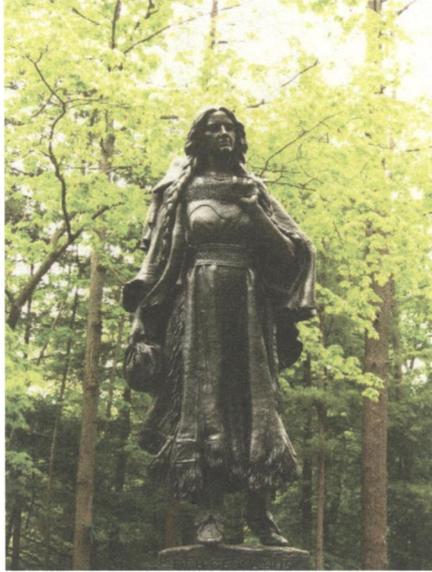


Photo Credit: https://4.bp.blogspot.com/-uJN72PHa0Mk/VCi-gqatuwI/AAAAAAB9Lg/1PqJ7BwBTM8/s1600/img_4254.jpg

So how does all this relate to writing center work? I imagine you are making connections as I speak. I've tried to put two powerful concepts side by side. Let's think together about these two compelling metaphors. A Moonshot is a noun, but its concept is almost exclusively verbal. When we take on ambitious, even audacious tasks, as Brad calls them, we have to dream and imagine, challenge, assess, plan, plan, plan, assess, and then re-plan. Then celebrate. Maybe. All verbs, all doing. On the other hand,

The frontier is truly a noun, a place, a barrier, a border, a challenge. We do well to think through and extend these metaphors.

There are times in our centers when we are the pioneers, the space explorers (literally), the innovators. We have powerful benefits to offer, and you know very well what those are, but we also do well to remember that every time we ask our institution to let us do our own work, we are asking for scarce funds that might be urgently needed elsewhere. At the same time, we can't let that stop us. As Michele Eodice (another Buffalo area native) points out in "Breathing lessons: Collaboration is. . . ," it's important for directors and staffers to know

the terrain, understand administrative structures, know where our funds come from. Know the mission statements of the various branches. Look at the strategic plan, and remind them to keep us in it. And remember to work collaboratively – and to share.

It's also important to learn the language we need to request the funds to do our so-important work. Lately that might mean knowing the language of metrics, the measures used to determine whether or not our schools get the funding they need. We must be able to show and communicate the ways that we contribute to the robustness of the institution.

It has also been important to us at FIU to have allies and alliances with some key people who have then advocated for us in ways that count. As we interact with our colleagues at our institutions, try imagining that anyone we work with has the potential to become a dean or a VP or even a provost. If you give them reasons to work with and for us, they will, partly because it's in their interests and partly because it's in the interests of students. And let's not forget the metrics.

Let me give you an example from our institution, Florida International University. FIU is a large state university that serves the Miami community but that also attracts both US-American and international students because of its emphasis on globalization. Our most recent figures show that our students are

- **61% Hispanic**
- **15% White Non-Hispanic**
- **13% Black**
- **4% Asian or Pacific Islander**
- **7% other minority groups**

About 50% of our students receive Pell Grants, and for us, that means a household income of under \$30,000.

Several years ago FIU received a Title V grant for Hispanic-serving institutions. For us, among other things, this meant designing and putting into place a Writing Fellows program, to give our students in selected sophomore-level courses an opportunity to receive one-to-one help, support, and mentoring with writing. At the time, it felt like a moonshot, with Brad Hughes serving as mission control as he helped us model our program after his.

Two years ago the grant ran out.

Fiu had promised us and the Federal Government that it would find the funds to continue the program. However, just as the grant expired, the provost returned to his faculty position and our dean took over as the new provost. The funds for the program would come from him.

We had hoped to hear in June of 2015 that the funds had been approved for the following fall semester. We had Fellows with great experience, and we expected to offer the course that would prepare new Fellows while they worked – and were paid. Whenever we asked, we were told that funding decisions were being made, but fall semester loomed, and when it arrived, we had no funding and no Fellows. Faculty members who counted on Fellows to help them get better drafts of papers were disappointed, students who benefitted and who might have found the encouragement to stay enrolled were disappointed, and frankly, I was disappointed. Our beautiful project was good to go, and in the larger scheme of university expenses, it was a bargain.

A full year passed before we heard that we would start fall semester of 2016 with a small core of Writing Fellows, with the promise that in the future, there would be more. It wasn't what we'd hoped for, but it gave us some Fellows and a full-time position for the coordinator of our Title V initiatives. Here is a story of how that happened.

We had long enjoyed a very good, mutually supportive, mutually respectful relationship with the staff of our teaching and learning center, and in 2012, Glenn Hutchinson, then our assistant director, co-authored and published an article on undocumented students with one of the administrators of the program, Isis Artze-Vega.

Last year, Isis, a great ally of ours, became the Assistant Vice President for Teaching & Learning, working out of the Provost's office. She helped to secure the full-time position we needed to administer the program, and she fought for us to get as many Fellows as she could. If we had not reached out to them, supported them, and kept them in the loop, this might never have happened.

It took creative problem-solving to make only ten Fellows work out when we needed 15 or 20 and at one time had upwards of 45, but if we had had an adversarial or competitive relationship with our colleagues, it's possible that none of our smart, dedicated, determined students would have the opportunities that Fellows now make possible.

This story, like many of your stories, are works in progress. We are not there yet. Anything could happen. We have no guarantees. But we've confronted daunting barriers, and we're ready to try the next moonshot.

For tutors, take Brad's advice and dream big. Bring us your challenges rather than just wish you could act on them. Let your directors and staffers and fellow tutors know your dreams and visions. We learn from you all the time. Help us think about how we can either make them a reality or help you do so.

Try to remember that for some writers, we represent a daunting boundary, a frontier of sorts. It can be hard to ask for help. It can be almost impossible for our FIU students to find the time to use our center. They have jobs. Some of our tutors have been homeless. We have a food bank for our own students. Some of our students and tutors have stories of exile and poverty that we can't even imagine. But we can be present for them and we can listen. We can mentor them and help them find services that might help them. When Red Jacket addressed Congress, he narrated the arrival of the first Europeans and said that they were welcomed as brothers. If we show respect for the writers who use our services, they will in turn respect us. The powerful literature on mindsets shows that learners at all levels respond positively when we praise specific efforts they make.

As I scanned through our conference program at home I saw some awesome accounts of moonshots and of barriers challenged, and I felt inspired. I know that we'll all leave this conference energized, inspired, and ready to try new challenges.

Acknowledgment

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About the Author

Paula Gillespie is the Associate Director of the Center for Excellence in Writing at Florida International University. She is the co-author of *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring* and the co-editor of *Writing Center Research: Extending the Conversation*. She is currently at work as a co-editor of [Landmark Essays in Writing Centers Since 1995](#).