

# To Pimp a Butterfly

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**Note:** This essay is a service narrative, written for a community-based College Writing Seminar. One major difference between a service-learning class and volunteering is reflection. The student writer chose to model their essay after [David Ramsey's "I Will Forever Remain Faithful: How Lil Wayne helped me survive my first year teaching in New Orleans."](#) originally published in *Oxford American*, a literary magazine, and was anthologized in *Best Music Writing 2009*.

## 1. "I remember you was conflicted, misusing your influence. Sometimes I did the same."

### 2. You ain't gotta lie

It's my first day at Kid Power, and the kids keep asking me if I'm a boy or girl. I reluctantly tell them I'm a girl and to call me Ms. Marissa. Every time they say Ms. Marissa, I feel like a fake.

It is pretty early in the school year, and I'm still learning the kids' names. I call out, "Devontae, do you need help with your homework?"

He looks at me with a twisted look on his face. He says, "It's DeLONtae, not DeVONtae." I apologize and never make the mistake again. They hate it when you can't pronounce their names right.

The movie *Straight Outta Compton* recently came out, and I asked the students who their favorite rappers were. Eventually, the conversation shifted from favorite rappers to popular female rappers. The kids decided that my short hair and masculine attire resembled that of Dej Loaf. After that they wouldn't stop calling me Dej Loaf. I preferred that name much more than Ms. Marissa.

### 3. Complexion

It's Black History Month. Every lesson for the past week has focused on different leaders within the Civil Rights Movement. Today Ms. Staci reprimanded Andrea, and Andrea snapped, asking why she had to listen to this white lady.

I'm already standing at the bus stop at Anacostia Station when Emily, another Kid Power staff member, walks up to me. "Hey, Marissa!" The black people surrounding us stare, surprised that I know this white girl, and a piece of me dies inside. I feel so much more vulnerable with a white person in Anacostia than I ever do alone.

We are gathered in the cafeteria for supper when Mark yells to Javion, "What are you talking about, nigga?!" Ms. Staci, overhearing, runs over and tells Mark, "If you can use that word so freely at school, I hate to think what sort of language you're using at home!" Mark and Javion's conversation didn't even make me blink, but Ms. Staci's reaction did. I didn't challenge her authority, but I did wonder what Ms. Staci could possibly know about the use of the word "nigga" in a black household.

#### **4. Hood Politics**

Every Wednesday at the end of Kid Power, Ms. Kim holds a dance class. When she came to the 4<sup>th</sup> grade class today to get the students lined up, Kaleem joined the line. Mr. Coleman called out to him and said that dancing was for females. I bet Kaleem could be the next Michael Jackson if he had the chance to show his moves.

Out of nowhere, Mr. Coleman grabbed Wayne from behind and put him in an arm lock. Holding this position, Mr. Coleman then proceeded to ask the students what Wayne should do to get out of this precarious situation. They raised their hands and jumped up, eager to answer Mr. Coleman's question. Mark then explained to Wayne what he should do. Wayne did so, and just like that the teaching moment was over. Wayne needed to know how to defend himself.

On Wednesdays we do art projects. This particular Wednesday we made necklaces. At first DeLontae refused to make one because he said that necklaces were for girls. Ms. Staci told him to go tell that to Mr. Martin, who wore a necklace every day. DeLontae then proceeded to make a necklace out of black, green, and grey beads.

On the way to work today, this guy wouldn't stop staring at me. His face was taut with anger or disgust; I don't know which. I couldn't figure out why he was staring at me until I got back home from work and took off my pink floral print rain boots; at the time they seemed like the perfect accessory to accompany my maroon polo shirt, boy jeans, and short haircut. He must have thought I was a guy. I hate when it rains.

I ran into Noah at the Metro Station on the way to work today. Clad in pink hair and eyeliner, she began to tell me about a boy at her Kid Power site who was very obviously gay. Noah was concerned for this boy because he often got bullied by his male peers for his flamboyance.

Fuck the patriarchy.

## 5. i

Sometimes I take the 30S bus back from work. The bus goes all the way from outside Stanton Elementary School in Anacostia to Tenleytown. People don't have a problem sitting next to me at the beginning of the ride, but by the time the bus reaches Pennsylvania Avenue, I ride the crowded bus with no one in the chair beside me. I wonder if they know I'm not contagious.

On the bus to Kid Power today, this one black teenager was looking at me. When I noticed, I stared right back at him. He looked away first, and I surged with pride. I have no problem staring down black people, but white people always make me look down.

Deijah finished her math homework, and I told her she was a strong, independent black person. She told me that she wasn't black; black is ugly.

The weather has been nice this week so I wore shorts to work today. I was met with two reactions. The first: why are you wearing booty shorts?? The second: why are your legs so hairy?! Mr. Dylan wore shorts today, too. When Asia pointed out that his legs were hairy as well, he responded that he was a guy. I never wanted to slap someone so hard before.

The next day, I wore shorts again – this time basketball shorts. Inside the classroom, Destiny asked me why I always dress like a boy. Asia got onto Destiny and told her that was rude! I responded that I did in fact get my shorts from the men's section, and Asia turned on me and said that was a no no. Destiny then asked me where I got my shirt from, and I said the women's section in Old Navy. I told them that clothes don't have a gender, but they wouldn't have any of it.

## **6. Mortal Man**

It is still fairly early in my time at Kid Power, and I'm talking to my coworker Becky on the way back home. She begins to tell me about her girlfriend and how much it sucks being in a long distance relationship. It is so relieving to have found another queer person to talk to. I wonder if I can be open to her about my gender identity and pronouns.

Andrea asked me if I had a girlfriend today. I immediately told her yes, and the students at the surrounding tables all gawked. They asked me once again to confirm that I indeed had a girlfriend, but this time I paused. My partner is agender. After a moment, I responded that I was indeed in a relationship, but I didn't specify my partner's gender. The next day, Andrea asked me if I was gay. I pretended like I didn't hear her.

At the beginning of the school year, Wayne would pretend like he was going to stab himself with a pencil. I kept telling him that he needed to take care of himself, and that it was dangerous to play around like that. At the beginning of the spring semester, he wouldn't stop kicking chairs and climbing on desks. One day, Sonia gave him a stress ball and it seemed to help, but then Ms. Staci took it away. A few weeks later, Wayne got kicked out of Kid Power.

Yesterday I heard that a student tried to kill himself at the elementary school. I thought about Wayne.

I was working on math with Sonia when Andrea, who was sitting next to Sonia, asked if we could all work together. I told her no, that it was against the rules. Just yesterday, Lakiya and Makayla had tried doing the same, but Ms. Staci shut it down. Andrea said that that was yesterday. I told her that the same rules apply no matter what day it is. In frustration, she smacked her lips and told me that I wasn't a real teacher anyway. An hour later, I led the VeggieTime lesson for my service project – making me THE teacher – but I still questioned how much influence and authority I had in comparison to Ms. Staci or Mr. Coleman.

## **7. Alright**

Since Spring Break, I have pretty much been the only site coordinator to assist Ms. Staci with the 4<sup>th</sup> grade class. Every week, Sonia asks me where Ms. Emily is at, where Mr. Alex is at? I tell her I don't know where Ms. Emily is, but Mr. Alex no longer works at Stanton Elementary; he is at another Kid Power site. At the time that I told her this, I didn't know

whether or not it was his choice to leave Stanton Elementary. The other day I ran into him on AU's campus, and I asked him whether he was transferred or if he requested to be moved. He told me that he asked to be moved. He wasn't going to work at a place in which someone was shot right outside the school every other week. I guess that's reasonable. But what about the kids?

Ms. Emily finally came back to work a month later. She was busy doing sorority stuff. But when she came back, the kids were just so excited. I feel selfish for wanting them to be that excited when they see me. *I never left them.*

This past Tuesday was Mr. Dylan's last day at Kid Power before finals. Everyone gave him a huge hug. Goodbyes are so bittersweet.

It is Tuesday, April 26, and it is my last day at Kid Power. For the activity today, we watched two spoken word videos and then the students wrote their own poems to perform in front of the class. As I began to write my own poem, I was reminded of a poem I wrote months ago to be performed at an open mic at AU. My poem talked about my inability to truthfully answer the kids' questions about whether I was a boy or a girl. I struggled for so long on whether or not to come out to these kids, but I no longer feel the need to explain myself to them. I don't need to place a label on who I am to be my authentic self. As I walk out the door for the last time, I'm swarmed by my students in a group hug. Sonia asks me if I'll be coming back next year, and I tell her that I don't know. I don't know what sort of impact I have left on these kids, but I know that I will never forget this moment or the lessons I learned from these kids.

That last day, I read my own poem: "I am a beautiful caterpillar. Do not let my small size or my average colors fool you. Underneath this guise is a butterfly. But I don't need you to see my wings for me to know I can fly."