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Poet professor reflects on imagination, students and racism in America

Early on, Michelle Petty-Grue's life in the arts found fertile ground in the misty woods and swan-filled ponds of her mother's native England, where the family was stationed for four years during her father's career in the US Air Force. Drawn to fantasy and science fiction, her young mind ran wild as she explored nature, devoured books and filled journals with stories of her own.

"I often credit my deep love for the English language and my rich imagination to that time in my life," said Petty-Grue, an assistant teaching professor in the College of Creative Studies (CCS) at UC Santa Barbara. "It was easy to imagine a world with magic thrumming in the mossy thickets as my friends and I walked to school."

A move to Vandenberg Air Force Base brought the family to Santa Barbara County, where Petty-Grue finished high school. The first in her family to attend college, she studied creative writing at Pepperdine University and earned her masters and Ph.D. from UCSB's Gevirtz Graduate School of Education. She joined CCS fulltime in 2020.

In 2023, three of Petty-Grue's poems were published; the first appeared in Anacapa Review, an extension of Santa Barbara-based [Gunpowder Press](#), and the other two — "Tree Roots and Make Believe" and "Stardust" — ran in The Elevation Review in a special issue dedicated to poets of color. She also won the Margaret T. Getman Service to Students Award for her commitment to the overall growth and

development of students and their quality of life at UCSB.

This year so far, on top of teaching commitments, she's expanding her previously published short story into a novel-length telling of a Black mermaid and a formerly enslaved African woman joining forces against the transatlantic slave trade. She's aiming to have a completed draft in about a year.

For the following interview, The Current caught up with Petty-Grue to learn more about her creative background, teaching philosophy and two of her recently published poems.

Growing up, were there any writers in your family?

Michelle Petty-Grue: Not in the traditional sense, but my father carried on the long tradition of oral storytelling that is still so vital in the African diaspora and in the Black American community in particular. Growing up, we lived on a tight budget that must have been strained by my voracious appetite for books. When it was time for bed and neither of us wanted to reread one of my books, my dad made up stories for me. Sometimes they were like Aesop's Fables, with a cast of animal characters from the African savannah. Other times, the marine mammals of the Pacific Ocean were the stars of his stories.

When did you start writing your own stories and what sort of feedback or encouragement did you get?

When I was in elementary school, one of my teachers required us to write stories in a journal. That was the beginning, I suppose. I wrote poems and stories throughout my time in high school, as well. In particular, my 11th-grade teacher was really supportive. He submitted my work to a statewide contest. I didn't win or even place as a finalist, but he gave me the letter of recommendation that he wrote. It was so affirming and it gave me the confidence to apply to colleges as a creative writing major.

How did college help to broaden your literary worlds?

My earliest influences had been fairy tales, then fantasy and science fiction by authors who were overwhelmingly white. It wasn't until graduate school, really, that I began engaging in texts written by Black authors, particularly James Baldwin, Nikki

Giovanni, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Octavia Butler and N.K. Jemisin. Their works helped me feel free to write about myself and the world I actually live in, not just the fantasy worlds into which I so often wanted to escape.

At Pepperdine, I was welcomed into the Great Books Colloquium, where a small cohort of students engaged in the literary canon. We started with Greco-Roman philosophy and epic poetry and ended with the early 20th century. That foundation was essential to my academic career, yes, but also shaped how I think and write.

What other impacts did higher education have?

It molded me into someone who cares deeply about service, purpose and leadership. I care about the content I teach, of course, and I enjoy theory, literature and the beauty you can find in a sentence. But I care more about my students, helping them find their own purpose and equipping them to take agentive leadership in their own lives.

What do you hope your students can learn about the role of fiction and poetry in current events?

My students increasingly come to UCSB already quite aware of the role of fiction and poetry to comment on and shape culture and politics. My role is to expose them to more examples, to provide questions for them to ponder that they otherwise might not have considered, and to create an environment in which they can feel safe to write about the hard things happening in their lives and the world — but also the beautiful things, too.

Let's get into your poetry. "Tree Roots and Make Believe" [see below] was based on your experience moving to Santa Barbara, correct?

Yes, I moved here in the fall of 2021 and to this particular neighborhood the following spring. I had recently gone through a divorce, so it was just me and my son. As a Black parent of a Black child, mixed though he is, I am constantly aware of the risks he can't take. For example, we don't have toy guns, not even the brightly colored kind. I am deeply aware of the looks we get and comments we receive. "Oh, his skin color is *just* the right shade" or "Oh, his curls are *perfect*."

I am quite strategic in making sure that everyone knows we belong in the neighborhood. I make sure that even the neighbors with "thin blue line" flags on their door think my son and I are among the "good ones." It's exhausting, but I will

always do what I can to protect my child and his ability to simply play make-believe games with the neighborhood kids.

Tree Roots and Make Believe

*Moving into a new neighborhood while Black
requires forethought.*

*Walk my fluffy white dog at different times of the day.
Neighbors meet me with her at my side.*

*Count 'thin blue line' flags.
File the knowledge away.*

*Walk down the block to the police station.
Introduce ourselves to the local cops, just in case.*

*I relax, just for a moment, to enjoy the ocean
California spring winds bring to my front porch.*

*I swing in my hammock and watch the children
climb among tree roots, play make-believe.*

Stick my hand into my pocket and find another

golden badge sticker. We have so many.

Can I make a bulletproof vest out of them?

Tell us about "Stardust."

"Stardust" is a layered little poem. In some ways, it's an ode to Langston Hughes, whose poems about the beauty of dark things, of the night, were so touching. Especially as a Black kid who grew up reading fantasy novels — where the height of beauty was to be alabaster white, to have skin so white it was translucent like fine porcelain — having such a well-regarded poet talk about the beauty found in the dark inspired me. If all of us are made of stardust, we are all made of something that once lit up the night sky.

What's another layer?

Since the days I started ballet and saw how starkly different my body was from my peers, I have had a contentious relationship with my body. I have, like the protagonist in Hopkins's "A Habit of Waste," wanted to discard my body, to shrink it, to contort it to fit into places and spaces. I have had to do a lot of work to get to a point where I can find value in my body that is not based on what it looks like. "Stardust" touches very lightly on some of that. It also speaks to the imposter syndrome I felt in high school and my new intentions to be more comfortable taking up space.

Stardust

We are star stuff.

Dead stars gift us beauty.

The same materials

*that made particles of light
so bright they lit our sky
from unfathomable miles away?*

They live in us.

*If we are made from the heavens
and the earth, perhaps we can
learn to approach our bodies
with reverence.*

*My body-mind, made of stardust,
earned a PhD in the halls
that denied my ancestors.*

*My body-mind, made of stardust,
re-fed to remind myself
my ancestors were worthy
of taking up space.*

So am I.

You mentioned that as an undergrad you never saw yourself represented in front of the classroom. How did that shape your teaching philosophy?

I follow three research-based concepts in my teaching: the importance of audience, culturally relevant pedagogy, and academic playfulness. These concepts guide my teaching. As not just a first-gen college student, but a Black student, I had to be constantly aware of my audience, both in my writing and in my physical performance as an academic, at every stage of my career. I find it important to make sure my students are aware of how they can analyze their audiences and make rhetorical moves accordingly. I am intentional about using culturally relevant pedagogy — though I have added trauma-informed pedagogy in the wake of the pandemic. And I like to give my students the opportunity to be academically playful so they can tap into their inner creativity and learn how art and research can positively feed each other.

Anything you'd like to add, particularly in the context of Black History Month?

I have such complex feelings about Black History Month. It is both a wonderful time of celebrating the amazing work and contributions of Black creatives, visionaries and activists, but it is also a time of unpaid labor and a reminder that most people don't bother to think about us outside of this month except in the ways we either serve them or make them uncomfortable.

It is a time when I hold the heavy reminder that we have — to quote “Lift Every Voice and Sing” — “come to the place for which our fathers sighed.” But the road we trod is still stony. Our tears still water it and the blood of our slaughtered is newly added to it on a terrifyingly regular basis. I get to dress up in matching BHM month T-shirts with my son, and yet wonder what these corporations really think about us. So while I am always glad for a chance to spotlight Black joy and Black art, I also wish people thought deeply about these things for more than just the shortest month of the year.

Tags

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