

To Think, To Write, To Publish

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As he sits in front of a microscope and computer screen in a long narrow room well stocked with books like Monachaetia and Pestalotia, Dr. Tesfaye Tedla does not look like your average soldier. With graying

hair receding behind his ears and a slightly stained lab coat, it is hard to imagine him on the front lines of any war. And yet, as he swivels his desk chair around to face me, fluorescent lights bouncing off his wire-rimmed glasses, he explains his role on the front line of what he sees as one of the most dangerous battles facing our nation today: the destruction of our country's agricultural industry and natural resources by foreign pests and pathogens.

"It's far less exciting than a bomb," he says, "because it's not bloody. But it could potentially have more devastating consequences."

The paragraph above is the opening scene excerpted from a first draft of "The War on... Agriculture? Protecting America's Borders from Invasive Species and Disease," an article written by **Angela Records** and **Roberta Chevrette**. Can you imagine a story like this on the pages of *The New Yorker*?

Chevrette, a social scientist and doctoral student in communication at Arizona State University (ASU), and I are participating as

fellows in an NSF-funded project called To Think, To Write, To Publish (TTTWTP). The program is led by Principal Investigator (PI) **Lee Gutkind**, "the Godfather behind creative nonfiction," and co-PI **David Guston**, professor of politics and global studies and codirector of the Consortium for Science, Policy, and Outcomes at ASU. The TTTWTP project began with a conference in October, where 12 emerging "next gen" communicators and 12 early career scholars—as well as creative writing professors and graduate students, museum professionals, and editors of mainstream publications—met to discuss the value and advantages of communicating science and innovation policy to general audiences using narrative, scene, and storytelling to engage and inform readers. Each scholar was paired with a writer, and each team was asked to spend the next several months researching and writing an article in the creative nonfiction style. The fellows will come together for a final workshop in May.

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As one of 12 writing teams, Chevrette and I were tasked with drafting a 5,000-word article on a scientific topic of our choice. The idea is to tell an engaging story that will attract interest in the topic from the general public. The 12 articles that result from the TTTWTP project will be published in *Creative Nonfiction*, the first and largest literary magazine to publish narrative nonfiction exclusively. We will also have the opportunity to submit our pieces to major publications like *National Geographic* or *The New Yorker*, for example. Chevrette is our team's "next gen communicator," and I am the "early career scholar." We are working closely with our mentor **Jason Bittel**, a science blogger who works in advertising and branding.

As the scholar of the group, I had the pleasure of proposing scientific topics for Chevrette's consideration. Obviously, I had every intention of using this opportunity to bring agricultural science to the public's attention. I pitched a few topics ranging from the role of women in agriculture in developing countries to the unsung heroes of agricultural extension to the need for agricultural science funding in the United States. Interestingly, Chevrette and Bittel both zeroed in on topic number four: USDA APHIS.

Bittel loved the idea:

"You'd get to glorify these folks as the front line against agricultural devastation!" he remarked. "The Seal Team 6 of Strawberries. The Green Berets of Green Beans. Ok, maybe that's a cheap thrill, but ... I think people would be really interested to see what these guys do EVERY SINGLE DAY to protect our plants. Very cool."

That settled it. Chevrette and I decided to write about APHIS, Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and their collective role in helping protect U.S. agriculture. We needed some information, so we headed to one of the busiest ports in the country—the Port of Los Angeles, where we interviewed scientists and inspectors at the local USDA APHIS facility.

The scene: We entered the chilly, garage-like area where imported propagative materials and other agricultural products are received for inspection. Ag inspectors armed with box cutters and latex gloves stood behind long, white tables while Styrofoam containers full of leaves were being unloaded from a delivery truck. Our tour guides, **Greg Bartman**, an entomologist with a mischievous grin and an awe-inspiring bug collection, and entomologist **Patrick Marquez**, a California native and avid photographer, were eager to narrate the show and encourage our hands-on participation. As we listened to the overview of the inspection process and posed—at Marquez's insistence—for numerous action shots, Chevrette and I had to be mindful of the scenic details. Works of creative nonfiction strive to be sufficiently descriptive so as to *show* rather than *tell*.

Stay tuned for news about the publication, which by the way, features a healthy dose of plant pathology. Also, check out the TTTWTP blog at www.thinkwritepublish.org/news. Likewise, Bittel's posts are worth checking out at www.bittelmethis.com and www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense.html. ■