

A SEMESTER IN PURGATORY: AT THE
INTERSECTIONS OF PEDAGOGY,
INTERPELLATION, QUEERNESS, AND MOURNING

by

ROBERT JOSEPH FAUNCE

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Date

Wayne Koestenbaum
Chair of Examining Committee

Date

Mario DiGangi
Executive Officer

___ William F. Kelly _____

___ Wayne Koestenbaum _____

___ Steven F. Kruger _____

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

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Adviser: Wayne Koestenbaum

A Semester in Purgatory: At the Intersections of Pedagogy, Interpellation, Queerness, and Mourning records an unusual project—one often attempted mid-career, rather than as a dissertation. It traces the process of developing pedagogy—from work gleaned in an academic practicum to experiences in the classroom—while incorporating the perspective of a generalist who is teaching three distinct periods in that semester being recorded (classics, medieval/early modern, composition). Concomitant to the research concerns in the project is the subjectivity of mourning, as my teaching and writing occur in the literal aftermath of my mother's sudden death, which necessarily becomes part of the project as it spectrally descends on my classroom, and my life. The dissertation thus considers a selection of important articles on the development of teaching (Elbow, Bartholomae, Perl, et al), while considering concerns of truth in autobiography (using Coetzee as a platform to works by Althusser, Williams, and Sontag) and the effects of mourning (both in narrative form, with writers such as Didion and Kincaid, and in psychological form, a rumination on the works of Melanie Klein and Silvan Tomkins). This dissertation emphasizes the development of an authentic personal voice—in writing and teaching—while also considering the identity politics and possible spaces for interpellation that complicate the classroom and personal pedagogy.

**for my mother,
Jeanne Marie Dunfey**

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Prologue

My mother passed away on August 23, 2006—suddenly and with no foreshadowing. She kissed me goodbye and watched me board a train back to New York, and, eight hours later, she was dead in New Hampshire. Our final conversation concerned my fears and issues over teaching a course on early modern and medieval literature that I had been assigned that morning; she advised me to just let myself “shine through” the material, arguing that my force of teaching would overwhelm the level of my experience, or any worries at having never read Milton before. My mother pushed me toward defining my pedagogy, and developing space for myself within the classroom and the academy. This project emerges from the teaching journal I kept during one tumultuous semester literally following her death. At the moment of composition, I am teaching at John Jay College, which is one of the 23 schools that make up the City University of New York (CUNY); the Graduate Center, where I am pursuing my Ph.D., is another CUNY school. This journal is done in my third semester of teaching; I have taught 2 sections of composition, a section of classical literature, and a section of American literature prior to this point, and, given my training as a generalist, I had requested a varied teaching schedule for this semester, which culminates in me teaching composition, medieval/early modern, and classics. I had also completed a teaching practicum at John Jay, which had exposed me to many of the theoretical texts on teaching composition that I will address in the next chapter. The teaching journal represents an attempt to document my nascent pedagogy, as reflected in the ideas put forth in this chapter as a lengthy “teaching philosophy,” but also represents my mother, who is with me as I write, as I think, and as I conceptualize. I

also take into consideration the words of Deborah Britzman, who, in *After Education*, nicely articulates the conjunction of recursiveness, education, and grief:

Education staggers under the heavy burden of representing its own cacophony of dreams, its vulnerabilities, and its incompleteness. If, in education, we must experience a confusion of time that makes distinctions among the past, present, and future difficult to maintain, if the love being offered heralds an impossible and a tantalizing promise and, then, if the thought of education must suffer from the grief of retrospection, from an after-education, then these processes are uncanny. Humans, after all, work both their breakdowns in meaning and their repairs of significance in similar ways. (9-10)

This project is divided into sections classified by chronology and theme, with some headings for journal entries, and others for comment. In “Intersections,” I lay out the case for a non-demagogic teaching philosophy by defining the crucial, intersectional texts (across literary and queer theory and into composition and rhetoric) that influenced my teaching development. Considering the work of Coetzee on issues of autobiography and truth, this chapter considers disparate writers (such as Butler, Sedgwick, Bourdieu, Bartholomae) in arguing in support of a place for generalist knowledge and supple interaction with a variety of critical camps and frames, all of which should provide some discursive space for a nascent professor/pedagogue. I ruminate on specific issues in the classroom (eliciting voices, grading, plagiarism), and I highlight significant texts to think (or rethink) how the current canon for composition influences nascent professors. Avoiding the hegemonic while encouraging the “authentic voice” is a theme introduced in this chapter, a theme that will recur and intersect throughout the text, along with the fears of losing ownership of your voice once it is heard. Is there a way to be truly non-demagogic in the classroom without controlling the discourses outside the classroom as well?

In “September: Pedagogy” (which includes the last three days of August), the writing emphasizes teaching plans and development of classroom strategies. As I begin to ascertain the needs and skills of the students in each of my distinct classrooms, I make alterations to my existing plans and approaches accordingly. Considering Estelle Freedman’s article, “Small-Group Pedagogy: Consciousness Raising in Conservative Times,” I change some planned lectures into group activities—partially to stimulate interest and partially to begin eliciting some non-homogenized reactions in my students. Heteronormativity is pervasive in these early class meetings, particularly in dealing with my medieval and early modern students. I refer to Richard Zeikowitz’s work on triangular desire in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* during a memorable class on that work as a way to shake the class out of its normalized doldrums, that this is not simply a fable with a hero, villain, and moral. Zeikowitz’s pedagogical article on teaching from this period, “Befriending the Medieval Queer: A Pedagogy for Literature Classes,” influences the core of this chapter’s concerns. How I formulate responses and complements to Zeikowitz’s zesty and incisive readings demonstrating the lacunae in medieval studies where queer content should be incorporated establishes a cornerstone for my pedagogical approach to teaching this period, and carries over to establishing a fluid pedagogy that is malleable not only to the period and genre but also to the distinctive classroom setting. This chapter also introduces the frenetic energy of the composition students in a multicultural New York classroom. Often just out of secondary school, these students bring challenges with them that must be negotiated successfully to instill in them the writing and comprehension tools they need to succeed throughout

college. Reflecting on how they behave—taking cell-phone calls in class, trying to proffer doctored doctor's notes, offering excuses instead of mandated writing assignments—provides opportunities to consider contributions to the academy on student writing and how these academic expectations of our students contribute to my own pedagogical development. “September” also establishes the most ambitious scope of this project—documenting my own reactions to such a massive critical legacy in tandem with my own teaching and my own life, and allowing for the reader (academic or otherwise) to identify accordingly the strands of the commentary and arguments that give him/her a space to define pedagogical terms for him/her own use.

“(Syllabus) Design for Living” is a short mini-chapter that considers the rigor of developing a syllabus, and the paradox I face in developing a pedagogy that embraces developing authentic voices in nondemagogic ways while creating a syllabus that is rather structured and foreboding. I explain how the use of such a meticulous syllabus enhances my abilities to be flexible and responsive in the classroom—since the rules and expectations are so clearly laid out in the syllabus. This piece also details the ways the rules and expectations are compiled—what assistance I received from my institution, what demands were placed on me by institutional rules, and how the syllabus reflects the discipline (whether composition or literature). I spend time detailing the realities of choosing a textbook and responding to time constraints (being assigned a class a week before its commencement can restrict your choices of texts and reading assignments). This small but important section spends time considering the importance of the

syllabus—which often goes unreported in academic writing on the development of pedagogy, but is nonetheless so crucial to the creation of a successful class.

The chapter, “October: Mourning,” sees more of my own mourning enter the writing, and thus enter the classroom. Among the ghosts we carry with us each time into the classroom are students with whom we regret a decision or remember their unfulfilled promise. The shock of my mother’s sudden passing begins to wear off, and the writing, which has steadfastly kept on topic with pedagogy and detailing the classroom, begins to chronicle some despair. It is in keeping with this emotional honesty that the academic themes begin to reflect mourning—dealing with Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking*, for instance, and her logical expressions of grief through her nonfiction. Didion’s scope differs from mine—endeavoring to provide an academic locus from which future queer and compositional work can spring—but her tight focus provides me ample opportunity for comparison and reflection. This chapter is also concerned with testimony and bearing witness—in this case, bearing witness to my own grief and creating appropriate testimony to my experience. Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Brother* relates to the research in this vein. Kincaid, witnessing and documenting the life and death of her brother, dissects her horror at the poverty of her antecedents (the Caribbean island from which she descended) even while compassionately embracing her brother, becoming spectral from the ravages of AIDS. Ultimately, this is a chapter that builds on the themes of pedagogy that will recur throughout the text, but focuses on the personal experiences felt during the mourning process and documented within a teaching journal with manifold aims.

A short aside on “Midterm Conferences and IRB Review” considers the tricky task of documenting student interaction. In the modern era with the safeguards of Institutional Review Boards protecting the ethical concerns of researchers, subjects, and institutions alike, it is impossible to detail the terms of Midterm Conferences with “character” detail for individual students without the use of student-signed waivers that would waive their rights to privacy. It is ethically necessary to use judgment as to whether this is worthwhile—disclosing the nature of the writing and putting students on notice that they are essentially being recorded for posterity. I made a conscious decision not to upset the class via the observer principle (the notion that anyone under observation will necessarily change his/her behavior because of the very act of being observed). This research is meant not to interfere with the basic work of the classroom: students are there to be educated by me, not to be documented in documentary terms. As a result, this chapter detailing my experiences with Midterm Conferences deals in broad strokes—addresses the issues endemic to conferencing and to dealing with a multicultural student population, without creating personal identities for the students. The students become, ultimately, disembodied—which coalesces as a metaphor with the image of my mother’s own corpse that begins appearing both in my writing and, to my wondering eyes, in the margins of my classrooms. “Midterm Conferences and IRB Review” becomes a comment that speaks to the personal journey of mourning as well as the specific ways that conferencing propels a semester forward, providing context to both student and professor about expectations and structure in the waning weeks of the semester, while simultaneously

illuminating ethical concerns about students and compositional writing, and exposing the spectral bodies in the text and the classroom.

“Queer & Nondemagogic Pedagogy” is a mini-chapter that explores the tropes of queer pedagogy that I have found useful—reviewing authors like Lauren Berlant, Michael Warner, and David Wallace—and uses my reflections on them to show how queer pedagogy influences a working definition of what I term nondemagogic pedagogy. Following on previous mentions of the term “queer,” including discussion of the uses of queer pedagogy outside of a queer subjectivity (i.e. how queer pedagogy can emerge organically without queer content, or without a self-defined queer subject position, which is so often the case in an undergraduate classroom), I move to specific works by Amy Winans and Deborah Britzman that fuse queerness, pedagogy, and psychology into texts that directly affect this research. This chapter considers disruptions to heteronormativity and takes up the work I did in “Intersections” on resisting hegemonic dominations and interpellating our students. Considering a practical application of small-group assignments, I show how to deploy queer/nondemagogic pedagogies in practical ways that can be applied not just in the Composition classroom, but also throughout classrooms that seek to empower our students’ voices and expand their loci of information without compromising their subjectivities or imposing a demagogic dumbing-down of the classroom to create consensus. Finally, I explore why the terms queer & nondemagogic pedagogies need to resist codification, but remain practical, esoteric, and primary to developing the mechanics of each classroom we teach in.

“November: Queer” follows on all of the concerns in the prior chapters while directly reflecting the pedagogical concepts explored in the prior mini-chapter. Having already introduced the psychological work of Christopher Bollas (whose *Being a Character* details the notions of writing dark experiences as a positive therapeutic genera) and D.W. Winnicott (whose notion of play in the psychologist’s office provides a blueprint for the classroom as a place of creative expression free from recrimination), I begin to build on established notions of pedagogy with my own positions designed to persuade and enlighten the students in my classroom with techniques that will transform any residual negative energy or reticence with my insight and course design. The theme of stardom also emerges in this chapter—as I am unexpectedly tapped to appear on the game show *Jeopardy!*, which infiltrates my writing concerns and creates logistical threats to my classrooms as I travel to London, Los Angeles, and Boston while trying to usher my students toward the finish line of the semester. Some of these events are unusual—and indeed provide the unique perspective of this writer’s experience—but ultimately these are unified under umbrella themes of academic concern, examining texts that can illuminate how each professor creates his own pedagogical space.

In the words of Michel Legrand: “Round, like a circle in a spiral; like a wheel within a wheel. Never ending or beginning, On an ever spinning wheel.” “December: Mobius Strips” is an ending without a conclusion. It is a chapter concerned with recursiveness and revisiting—as the semester ends, as the text ends, but the writer and journeyman still go on. Unlike many works in which the writer terminates his relationship with what T.S. Eliot calls his “dark embryo,” this child of darkness has its unique place within the writer

(a good “internal object” in the terms of Melanie Klein). As exhaustion kicks in, and the hangover of a disastrous experience on television merges with the oncoming holidays to plunge me into a blue period, I must somehow pull myself together in the classroom and on the page. The notion of being a student while concomitantly teaching emerges as I explore a work of “celebrity life writing” that doubles as memoir, for both this journal and as academic writing. I reflect more on the capacity of “composition and rhetoric” to include “life writing,” and to create a frisson of interest in seeing the capacity of composition and rhetoric to include the traditional generalist.

The final chapter, “August: Recursiveness,” picks up from the last chapter, but nearly two years have passed; this final chapter narrates some of the mourning processes that have occurred in the interim period while also reviewing the research on life writing and the themes of this project in the intervening period. It’s an ending that spends much time recursively exploring the themes of prior chapters, trying to underscore conclusions without foreclosing any possibilities. If the work as a whole is designed to open up broad loci on the teaching experience that provide ample opportunity for projection and extraction alike in the reader, then this chapter must necessarily function as one that leaves the journey and the process open-ended. This work is diegetic—it is the narrative you see and perceive here, but the process of teaching is not diegetic: it continues on past the end of the celluloid or the last page of this dissertation. The ambitions for this project are two-fold: to explore a personal journey with substantial attention to my character and my reactions while exploring academic valences of themes such as queerness and pedagogy, interpellation, mourning, and stardom. As that semester ended, I prepared to

teach a new slate, with new students, and new challenges. This work ends concerned not with the termination of this semester but concerned with the next, with personal continuation, as all educators and writers do with each passing semester and written work. We evolve individually, and while this grouping of experiences and analyses of academic work provides me a touchstone with which to continue growing, it is by no means expected to be that touchstone for any other reader, but rather a locus for consultation, authentic classroom experience, and insight into one nascent, supple pedagogy.

Intersections

During the moribund times between my undergraduate work at Penn and entering the Ph.D. program in English at The Graduate Center, CUNY, I would indulge my academic leanings by reading the now-defunct *Lingua Franca*. In the issue that straddled the Millennium commotion (December 1999/January 2000), James Miller wrote a piece profiling a raging debate between “academic luminaries” (such as Judith Butler and Jonathan Arac) and “public intellectuals and journalists” (such as Katha Pollitt and Russell Jacoby) on the uses of “bad writing” and academic jargon. As Miller recounted the ways various eminent thinkers defended their turf (distilled here as speaking in high academic language that puts the onus on the reader to educate himself in order to keep up versus making the effort to communicate with linguistic transparency), I found myself utterly ambivalent—torn between the desire to valorize our intellectual betters, who’ve doubtlessly earned the right to speak in whichever forms they choose, and the argument for clarity in communication. Years later, thinking about my place in the academy, I am still ambivalent. This project began out of necessity—entering my second year of teaching, and working on my oral examination lists questioning the valences and intersections of queer with traditional disciplines, including pedagogy, I was questioning my standing and what values I represented as I entered the classroom (and the academy). In a job environment increasingly predicated on choosing an area, I continue to straddle lines (temporally or disciplinarily drawn) that are increasingly cordoning me off. I graduated with two degrees in English from Penn, with no area or field. I was a generalist, which leaves me feeling quite defunct, given the increased stratification of research interests and job assignment by narrow interest. I read Diana Taylor’s recent

article “Remapping Genre Through Performance: From ‘American’ to ‘Hemispheric’ Studies” with some amusement (though not directed at Taylor’s lucid argument); I found it ironic that we’ve become so narrow in our spatial and temporal boxes for research that we are now “expanding the map” even while we disregard those who study the whole map, or most of the map, or wildly disparate areas of the map, with an emphasis on studying maps of different eras. I’m still establishing “my standing” but I recognize that I am not constricted by philosophy or jargon in whom I read or whom I use in my work; when I cite Sedgwick or Butler, it is not taking a stance for jargon vs. accessibility—it is about utilizing my own knowledge base. Many of the sources I cite in this work are representative either of recent scholarship that I am aware of through reading certain journals (as part of a professional obligation to do so as well as for continued edification) or of scholarship that could be considered populist or “important.” It’s wholly appropriate—particularly in the work of a young scholar, exploring his own processes of teaching and establishing academic credentials—to be conversant with significant texts of a field; it’s particular imperative in a work that will bring together fields and times to think in generalist terms.

The “Intersections” I’ll review in this chapter consider that this is a project about writing but neither is it explicitly nor exclusively a work of composition, or rhetoric, or queer theory/studies, or medieval/early modern, or classics (nor world literature, film, American literature, or any of the other times/fields I’ve taught or studied). When I was first conceiving this project, my hope was to explore the intersections of queer theory, composition and rhetoric, and the importance of maintaining the self in the classroom

fraught with opportunities to lose your sense of self, through the maintenance of a journal that would be emended with reflections on cornerstone academic writings. In this introduction, I will be reviewing the critical writing related to these academic fields, and considering intersections that I mark as important to the development of my pedagogy. I'll consider the importance of journaling in academic exercise (particularly composition & rhetoric), and explore my fears regarding truth and witnessing in first-hand accounts. Out of those concerns I will explore the work of J.M. Coetzee and his reflections on the relationships of truth and confession to hierarchical power structures. From Coetzee I'll explore intersections with Rousseau and the notion of truth as a form of capital, leading into further connection with Bourdieu and J.L. Austin about linguistic exchanges and capital, and concerns about how language can be deployed as a form of indoctrination. These theoretical movements take me into contact with Foucault and thinking about the ways in which texts or discourses serve transgressive functions—which brings me back to Coetzee, and his concerns that truth in autobiography is a potentially dangerous space when the individual risks losing exclusive rights to interpret his own experiences.

From these potentially paranoid reflections I move into thinking about Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's reflections on the work of Sogyal Rinpoche, and the ways in which pedagogy can incorporate the personal while avoiding the indoctrination consistent with how Althusser explains the Ideological State Apparatus, which I explore in the context of the classroom setting. Althusser significantly documents for us the ways in which individuals can be interpellated in oppressive state systems, and I use this model to show how interpellation can be dangerously replicated by a professor who relies on the

demagogical position of the lectern to make judgments of right and wrong versus the development of voice and worldview in our students. In tandem with Althusser I discuss Christopher Bollas' notion of "extractive introjection" to connect not just the worries I have about students parroting my ideas as truth, but also my original worries about the journaling process, and the loss of personal identity through writing. The development of a strong sense of self (and of not being "subjected" by dominant or hegemonic forces) influences my pedagogical style, and is given reflection in context with Raymond Williams' "Hegemony." My fear of classroom hegemony leads to a reflection on Melanie Klein and reparative processes, and to a transitional moment where the reflections on the theories that influence me as I think about writing in and about pedagogy yield to thoughts about the teaching philosophy.

The second section of this introduction moves away from the various theoretical influences of creating pedagogy and lays out elements of my teaching philosophy (particularly as they stood in August 2006) as well as my concerns over the practice and authentication of life writing and journaling, since so much of this project emanates from the journals I kept on teaching in that semester. Much of the reflection comes from work that could be easily dismissed as a "greatest hits" list of Composition & Rhetoric; this is entirely intentional. This reflection is not meant to impersonate the work of a master rhetorician or a specialist in the field, but rather to demonstrate the reactions of a young professional endeavoring to teach for the first time encountering the reading list of a Practicum on teaching which provides specific foundations on which to develop an understanding of the rigors of the classroom. My reflections on these readings reflect

how my ideas on teaching were created through examining these works; they consider intersections with each other, and with the ideas of this project, wondering how to develop our students' voices in tandem with our own. Many of these works are older, and some of the authors may have moved away from their own ideas in later writings, but they still reflect not only my own experiences in reading in the Practicum on teaching, but also the standards of the Composition & Rhetoric field. This work endeavors to record a semester of teaching, learning, and living, while recognizing potentiality across subjects, receivers, authentic and constructed voices, and mis/memories (an ambitious goal, to be sure, but not nearly so comprehensive as the work of the professor in managing these intersections and possibilities in each student and situation during a semester). In articulating an academic *modus operandi* and delineating apprehensions and fears, I reinforce the importance of motivation: I teach because I can, because I want to, because I believe I am good at it. I need to remember that not as a hubristic moment (or even to tell you what I have yet to prove), but as a self-motivating moment: when I first entered the classroom, I was convinced I would be bad at it. What saw me through, in addition to the grounding in basic texts that I will be discussing in this chapter, was to remind myself of why I do it, and what I see as the end result of my work: I teach to influence how students learn—not just from me, but after me. I teach not to be remembered but to be, in some ways, suffused: I teach so that any crumb of wisdom or effective learning technique becomes part of my student's corpus. And I remember (and document) my teaching because it is part of my truth, my autobiography, and my motivation for entering academics. As Sondra Perl demonstrates in *On Austrian Soil*, it is not always in following the path laid out for us that we find powerful experience in our

teaching—in documenting such experiences in teaching journals and creating texts from those, we are able not only to see lessons for ourselves (and indeed, in Perl’s case, to have a record of a deviation from a plan that yields powerful fruit, personally and professionally) but yield a document that contributes to the academy—and not just one discipline or area.

Detailing personal journeys as an academic exercise is not a new endeavor. Alice Kaplan, in *French Lessons*, kept a five-year journal of her endeavor to learn French while also reflecting on her work with de Man and Celine, consciously including quotidian details of her personal life. Cathy Davidson’s *36 Views of Mount Fuji* details her efforts to teach English in Japan in 1980—capturing the nuances of the time and space as well as her own labors to ground her pedagogy while in a series of raucous and often discomfiting situations. Most influentially, Sondra Perl’s recent and significant work, *On Austrian Soil*, details her personal journey to Austria to work with secondary school teachers there and her confrontations with her own Jewishness in the face of a country that represented the atrocities of the Nazis. Her detailed teaching journals never eschew the intrusion of the personal; the embrace of the spatial orientation of the writer (where she is, what she is thinking, what externalities have shaped that day and that moment) provides unique insight into the acts of teaching as well as the concomitant personal growth that Perl experiences. Even with my awareness of the valid uses of the academic journal, however, I’ve had fears regarding the deployment of such a document, even with the best of intentions, in the academy.

Echoing my prior statements in eschewing one area's dominion, I am bringing some of these works of composition theory together with works of theory (literary and otherwise) that deal with my concerns. My fears regarding journal writing, and its valid use as an academic writing exercise, stem from my own feelings on truth, autobiography, and modes of control, which are exemplified in works by the South African Nobel laureate J. M. Coetzee. Rita Barnard has noted that Coetzee shares something of "Plato's skepticism about what the poet might do in the world: a body still chained in darkness can scarcely be an unacknowledged legislator, nor a herald, nor even a truthful witness" (Barnard 1). In post-Apartheid South Africa, there was much consternation over the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which, in effect, was creating a "safe space" (via general amnesty) for public confession, and paralleled the work of Coetzee *during Apartheid* concerned with the validity of such "safe space." The very notion of establishing a safe space to "confess," and then to receive institutional absolution, is strikingly parallel to the hierarchical power relationships that J. M. Coetzee decries in a "fictive" war-torn South Africa in *Life and Times of Michael K*. Hierarchical power relationships are abundant in Coetzee's novel: there are those who own and control resources (such as food, money, and land) and those who must be servants and workers for the former group. Coetzee does not merely demonstrate the mechanisms of hierarchized power relations in terms of material possession and physical control, but extends the determination of social power into the metafictional realm. Within Coetzee's novel, the "story" of the individual becomes a desired resource and, ultimately, a source of manipulation. Officers, soldiers, and those in charge of the camps want to know the "stories" of their inmates in order to "rehabilitate" them, and capture their minds (as well

as their bodies). The possessors of power in Coetzee's system can sustain their hierarchical system by retaining a hold on the physical resources one needs to live on and by having in their possession the stories and narratives of the subordinate.

Continuing to think in intersecting terms allows us to see the relevance of thinkers as disparate as Rousseau, Bourdieu, and J.L. Austin in considering the power dynamics of our writing and the classroom. In his article "Truth in Autobiography," Coetzee connects the power relations that derive from control over physical resources to control over narrative. In his assessment of Rousseau's *Confessions*, Coetzee compares Rousseau's anxiety over spending money with his concern for telling the whole truth about himself in his autobiography. Coetzee asserts that spending money is like "spending your freedom" (2), because money gives one the power to buy the resources one needs and desires. Rousseau finds it troublesome to spend money in order to appease his desires (such as hunger) because not only is he "spending" his power by letting go of the medium which grants him the freedom to buy, but his own desire is not "unique and individual anymore" (2). His inner desire is "open and equalized" by the mediation of money and put on to a hierarchical scale of desire, in which some desires are worth more than others. Rousseau's desire for a "five-sou" piece of cake becomes synonymous with any desire for something worth "five-sou." By making his desire *known* through the use of money, Rousseau loses control over the terms by which he defines his own desire. And, as Coetzee indicates, if Rousseau were to find out all of the truths about himself, and if he were able to write them all down in his autobiography, he would lose control over the value and meaning of his own story. Others will read his confessions and be able to

interpret them in whatever way they please. This notion of a loss of control will figure heavily in the narrative of this work—trying to accept the loss of ownership (of the text, of your “teacherly advantages”) that emerges when you begin to define your pedagogy and philosophies in ways readable by any audience. Bourdieu, in *Language and Symbolic Power*, follows Rousseau’s line by linking linguistic exchange with economic exchange—and in a nod to J. L. Austin, notes that “utterances are not only...signs to be understood and deciphered; they are also *signs of wealth*, intended to be evaluated and appreciated, and *signs of authority*, intended to be believed and obeyed” (66). Working in any pedagogical space creates a power dynamic, and this can be exacerbated by economics—particularly when the possibility for appropriation and subversion is present. It does not take much rooting through sociology and psychology archives to discover many moments of “ordinary” people (often students) “following” orders: the Milgram experiments, the Stanford prison experiments, and the 1967 “Third Wave” neo-Nazi experiment all document the phenomenon of impressionable young minds committing extreme acts in the name of “following orders.” The demagoguery of discourse and dissemination can be just as powerful, and indoctrinating.

In “What Is an Author?” Michel Foucault discusses the “author-function” and the discourses that emanate from authorship: “Discourses are objects of appropriation. Texts, books, and discourses really began to have authors (other than mythical, ‘sacralized’ and ‘sacralizing’ figures) to the extent that discourses could be transgressive. In our culture (and doubtless in many others), discourse was not originally a product, a thing, a kind of goods; it was essentially an act—an act placed in the bipolar field of the

sacred and the profane, the licit and the illicit, the religious and the blasphemous” (607). Foucault details the ways here in which text or discourse serve a transgressive function. In Derridean terms, Foucault firmly places authorship and the appropriation of the discourse by the audience/reader/state in an escalating binary of reified power structures of subjectivity and appropriation. In his article, “Truth in Autobiography,” Coetzee writes about the power of “presence” and interpretation within hierarchical systems. Once a story is made known to the outside world, or once any desire is displayed to the public, the individual risks losing his or her exclusive rights to interpretation and risks losing control over what meaning will be assigned to his own story or desire. Furthermore, the act of telling one’s own story involves the two-fold action of telling the “truth” and finding the “truth.” Thus, the “truth” of past experience and thought is at great risk of being manipulated by the thoughts and rhetoric of the present storyteller. Truth and interpretation are potentially disorientating spaces without careful consideration of personal beliefs and pedagogy.

I draw heavily on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who has written in *Touching Feeling*, analyzing Sogyal Rinpoche’s *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, that “a reader who begins this book is, by means of her disorientation, interpellated into a rich yet dissolvent relationality of pedagogy itself. In this world it is as though relation *could only* be pedagogical—and for *that* reason, radically transindividual” (160, author’s emphasis). My fears regarding truthiness and appropriation extend to a pedagogical position in the front of the classroom—how to prevent my own perspective and worldview from being interpellating or co-opting. Sedgwick, Rinpoche, and Althusser

are intrinsic to the path-making ideas of a non-demagogic pedagogy (a term I will discuss at length in a later chapter on its relation to queer pedagogy). Although his critique is endemically Marxist and concerned with governance, Louis Althusser's work on ideological state apparatuses, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," is directly relevant to my own non-demagogic teaching philosophy. He states that through the mechanisms and covert manipulations of cultural institutions (like churches, or my classroom), individuals become "subjects" to their society's "ruling ideology" (Althusser 132). Althusser stresses that an individual is never a free agent, never liberated from the culturally rooted "ideas," "rules," and beliefs of his or her society (even if an individual has just moved into a new culture, he is still a "subject" to his former cultural context and he will slowly be converted into a "subject" of his new environment's ideology). Althusser asserts that "you and I are *always-already* subjects" to the ruling ideology (or ideologies) of our societies. Even before birth, the individual is *given* an identity (his Father's name, his "expected" sexual preference depending upon gender) and assigned to a specific spot within a "familial ideological configuration" (Althusser 176) in which certain behavior is expected of the individual by the family unit as a whole. Our "subjection to the ruling ideology" is created, controlled, and maintained by cultural institutions such as school, family, and church, thereby bringing Althusser to define these social fixtures as "Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs)." Through the ISAs, children and adults not only learn "techniques and knowledges" for practical application in the workplace, but they also learn the "rules of good behaviour," "morality," and "proper" ways to interact socially with others. ISAs present and indoctrinate the individual into a

certain “world outlook” (or attitude) that conforms to the overarching ideology of the dominant, ruling class of a given society—or a classroom: “The individual in question behaves in such and such a way, adopts such and such a practical attitude, and what is more, participates in certain regular practices which are those of the ideological apparatus on which ‘depend’ the idea which he has in all consciousness freely chosen as a subject” (Althusser 163). Judith Butler, in her analysis of J. L. Austin and cross-burning, “Burning Acts,” is apprehensive about the accretion of force in performative acts and slurs, and the ways in which subjects become governed by or injured by performative acts or slurs by dint of the repetition and cycle of those actions (Butler’s article is also a chronicle of the judicial process’s involvement in such speech acts, and the ways in which speech is thus governed by an appointed body of the state). Butler goes on to consider hate speech and definitions of it, but speech need not be hateful to be destructive when elements of social conditioning and interpellation exist, particularly in a composition classroom that often consists of students who’ve been conditioned through twelve to fifteen years of schooling to obey a professorial master (an image that may seem oversimplified unless you’ve spent time trying to break down the unifying, reifying behaviors of the first-year college student, projecting institutional authority onto their professors—often in Composition).

This social conditioning provides that the individual will “represent [his] real condition of existence to [himself] (the ideological apparatus on which) in an imaginary form” (Althusser 163)—the “imaginary form” being the form that conforms to the dominant ideology, thus rendering the imagination (and any self-understanding)

a slave to outside forces. In the classroom, this social conditioning can be as simple as a student “parroting” the lecture notes of a professor back as gospel, or as pernicious as such echoed ideas becoming the basis of a plagiarized paper. My fears of the personal narrative (and, concomitantly, of the lectern) stem from what Christopher Bollas has explained, in *The Shadow of the Object*, to be a form of extractive introjection, which he defines as “when one person steals for a certain period of time (from a few seconds or minutes, to a lifetime) an element of another individual’s psychic life” (158). The theft of mental content is the element that Bollas would identify as being the object of extractive introjection in this classroom relationship as well as in the journaling process—opening up personal truths and pedagogical opening provides currency (pace Bourdieu and Coetzee) for my ideas and mentality to be actively appropriated and/or passively interpellated, which, while ultimately healthy in providing a space for further study or reflection, can yield an “unhealthy” loss of personal identity if not properly protected/safeguarded. Susan Sontag has said, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, that “to the militant, identity is everything” (10), and I respond by vigilantly protecting my classroom space from becoming the realm of the militant, the interpellative, or the doctrinaire.

Any young professor may look to “big names” for direction (Sontag and Butler, for instance, are useful in this text as much for their ideas as for their totemic space in the academy). Students, particularly secondary school and undergraduate, are looking to define their space in the world, and quite often (in my experiences to date) look for the “answer” from any source that will proffer one. We can apply Althusser’s notion to the

student's subjugation in such a classroom; there is an "imaginary nature" to the "subject's" perception of herself in relation to society, and it is the subject's illusory vision of his place and function in the world that "underlies all the imaginary distortion that we can observe in all ideology" (Althusser 164). It is not valid to say that a certain ruling or dominant class (or even a professor) simply brainwashes individuals. Althusser asserts that ideology (learned via ISAs) "interpellates individuals as subjects" (171). The subject of a ruling ideology truly believes that his self-understanding corresponds in the "right" or "just" way to his surroundings. The subjects willingly "work by themselves," often to the advantage of some ruling class, thinking that they are individuals and free in their own ideas. Furthermore, the ruling class consists of "Subjects" also (distinguished with a capital 'S,') because the "Subjects" *depend* upon the lower-class "subjects" to support the ruling class's self-perception and illusion of greatness and superiority (Althusser even calls God the "Subject *par excellence*" (173)). It would be easy for any professor to fall into this demagogic trap; we must constantly remain vigilant that our classrooms not become interpellative states.

Althusser's description of the interpellation of individuals into subjects may seem to be unrelated and distant from any view that humans behave in some instinctual manner in the interests of the self; after all, Althusser is essentially arguing that humans see a distorted representation of themselves and their societies because of the workings of ideologies and ISAs. Outside forces mold a person's entire self-perception and view of existence, which can often work against the best interests of the individual. However, Althusser further complicates his theory by saying: "Man is an ideological animal by

nature” (171). Crucially, internal instinct and external ideology confront each other and, according to Althusser, they do not seem to contradict one another (even when they ought to in the best interests of the self, such as for the “lower” classes that are kept out of power because of external ideology). Althusser observes that humans are psychologically and inherently inclined to perceive themselves as representations befitting a dominant ideology. A person’s full, “whole” character is comprised of the deep and complicated entanglement of a person’s experience, his highly individualized temperament, and her interaction with a ruling ideology which creates the individual’s “whole” perception and understanding of herself in relation to society. Mary Elliott has distilled this fear of the hegemonic professor in “Coming Out in the Classroom” when she notes that one fear of sexuality-disclosure in the classroom is “being perceived as an ideologue who imposes radical ideologies on students” (702). There are certainly ethical concerns that flow from any “closeting” in the classroom, but there is also an obligation to my students, and to the ideas that I teach. I am constantly trying to eschew any hegemonic moments in the classroom, by carefully defining my own values and worldviews, and carefully eschewing any demagogic delineation of them—even if that sometimes means not taking an active stand against homophobic, classist, or racist discourses in the classroom. Understanding the traditional uses of the term “hegemony” is useful in considering what I am looking to avoid in my classroom. Raymond Williams, in the “Hegemony” chapter of *Marxism and Literature*, explains that “hegemony” introduces a complex problem that goes beyond what “culture” or “ideology” explains, for hegemony recognizes that the systems of dominance and subordination are still not recognized as a whole process because our language and

certain cultural connotations of language inherently include dominant meanings and values; hegemony attempts not to equate “formal meanings and values” with consciousness. Williams asserts that hegemony involves viewing these “formal meanings and values” of ideology as a “practical consciousness” that is put to use by the dominant class to control others. Like life in an ISA, people exist with multiple layers of consciousness, but the consciousness they feel they “should” have is the one they express. People hold many secrets, and most people don’t fit into ideological structures as well as they should: many people have a “deviant” side to them, but they often hide these “anomalies” because they perceive that they will be expelled from the “normal” by making such an admission. Williams’ work examines the relations between externalized culture and ideology, within/out the individual, and how the lived experience is so often different from the thought experience. Williams describes hegemony as a process—constantly transformed, manipulated, renewed, and re-established over and over again in different forms, in different geographic locations across temporalities; it is dynamic and neutralizing, since “the decisive hegemonic function is to control or transform or even incorporate [alternatives and opposition]” (Williams 113). Fear of a hegemonic or interpellative space in my classroom is easily repaired by self-awareness and by a non-dogmatic dogma: creating a baseline teaching philosophy that remains fluid and supple while nonetheless built on the foundation of the rich work of the academy on composition and pedagogy. I am indebted to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in *Touching Feeling*, for the illustrative work she has done with paranoia and Melanie Klein’s paranoid position, which she characterizes as one of “terrible alertness to the dangers posed by the hateful and envious part-objects that one defensively projects into, carves out of, and ingests

from the world around one” (128). My fear of the classroom hegemony—with me as the lonely despot—can be transmogrified into something fruitful: a teaching philosophy, and baseline interpretations of the composition and rhetoric academy, determined at the dawning of my academic career, and crafted with love, which, Sedgwick points out, is one of Klein’s reparative processes.

Much of the works I’ll cover in the following pages were first read in the context of a Teaching Practicum in my first semester of teaching at John Jay. They reflect an array of ideas and perspectives on teaching—some of them quite dated but nonetheless relevant to the field. I find my fear of hegemony to be useful in thinking about the processes of developing pedagogy and encouraging our students to be participants in process-based learning because rejecting hegemony reflects a desire to discover truth for and by yourself—which directly corresponds to the development of a personal, authentic voice (which I’ll address later). Although the quote is truistic enough to be attributed to anyone, it is the legendary figure skater Michelle Kwan who first told me that it’s not about winning but rather about the journey, or, the process. As a professor, I am impelled to guide my students along an arduous process of learning, unlearning, and relearning, in which the rewards are often the fruits of the labor (from the process itself), and not the final grade. My students enter my class with a personal history of roughly two decades; they will spend four months with me, and then move forward into new journeys and adventures in education, and beyond. I am aware of the points that Susan Sontag makes in “Against Interpretation” when she reminds us that “interpretation takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there” (14). As readers of

literature, we often try to find the “true meaning” behind the written text; in the process of allocating “meaning” and “truth” to the subtext, Sontag claims that our interpretations “violate” the objectivity and autonomy of a work, forcing a text into an “article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories” (11). Sontag suggests that the interpreters of today set out to make the text intelligible and understandable, which it is not when left alone. Modern interpretation is “stifling” because meaning and truth are inscribed in the subjective rendering of a critic, and displaced from the actual form of the text itself. Interpretation of literature and art has become “*the* modern way of understanding something,” and hence the immediate form of art is drained of its power and importance. Power is given to the critic, the interpreter whose own view of a text (and its subtext) shapes its overall meaning and value. Thus, interpretation becomes a tool of oppression (even an ISA) used by the “armies of critics” who try to “squeeze more content out of the work than is already there,” suffocating our sensory experience of art. Sontag evaluates the responsibility of the critic and asserts that “the function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is, even that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*” (14). The critic should aid us in feeling art, in experiencing “the luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are” (13). To the best of our abilities, as readers we should indulge in an “erotics” of art, as critics we should nourish and heighten the reader’s sensitivity to art and literature, and as educators we should allow a panoply of perspectives and cultural antecedents to inform and enlighten ourselves, and our classrooms.

Glynda Hull and Mike Rose's "'This Wooden Shack Place': The Logic of an Unconventional Reading" provides me a jumping-off point for bringing Sontag's ideas into relation with how I view my students. Their article, which discusses the ways in which students can bring unconventional writings that are not deficient in their difference, but rather a challenge to our norms, illuminates for me experiences—and languages—that can differ wildly from my own. Particularly in any composition or writing-intensive seminar, it is crucial to expect viewpoints and varieties of expression that can seem unconventional. While my goals include establishing core literacy in my student-writers, I am also very concerned with the development of their voices—which often means listening to what they have to say (in class, in papers, in conference) in order to facilitate an application of newfound literacy skills through their own voices. I am concerned with students feeling comfortable allowing their ethnic, sexual, socioeconomic, and religious experiences/identities (among others) to flow through their writing and in their classroom discussion about their writing.

bell hooks's *Teaching to Transgress* captures many of the strands that can add up to complex, multilayered subject positions in a teacher. Discussing the discords and symmetries inherent in cross-examining race, gender, and class conflict while also performing a subject position (such as black, feminist woman), hooks's text testifies that it is possible to consider education as a practice of freedom (which includes the pedagogical decision to encourage dissent or to find merit in arguments that might disagree with an aspect of your subjectivity, as hooks discusses in her chapter on Paulo Freire's "sexist language" in contrast with her self-avowed feminism). hooks tells us that

“Teaching is a performative act. And it is that aspect of our work that offers the space for change, invention, spontaneous shifts, that can serve as a catalyst drawing out the unique elements in each classroom. To embrace the performative aspect of teaching we are compelled to engage ‘audiences,’ to consider reciprocity” (hooks 11). Indeed, it is in thinking about how we perform, and what reciprocal responses we seek, that we create dynamic classroom spaces, and, ultimately, students who leave our classes with substantial edification beyond a cursory memorization of facts.

I am concerned with privileging the *voice* with my students, which is why I am so indebted to Ken Bruffee, who tells us in “Collaborative Learning and the Conversation of Mankind” that “language and its products, such as thought and the self, are social artifacts constituted by social communities” (636), and that as such, there are no “correct” voices in the writing classroom (at least, there ought not to be). Toby Fulwiler, in “Looking and Listening for My Voice,” condenses these ideas more succinctly: “Our voices are determined largely outside ourselves, according to where we live and work, what we read, and with whom we interact” (214). Seeing the socially constructed constraints of our voice, and how they affect our writing, is a crucial element to my early-semester teaching—allowing my students to express where they are, and how they were constructed by the various forces in the years prior to my acquaintance with them. It’s crucial to make my students comfortable with the topic material, and with the respect they will receive from me and engender in their classmates if they, too, respect the polyglot of mores and antecedents in our urban classroom. Since my classroom is often built around issues of gender and sexuality, and since I expect full participation, I implore

those who feel uncomfortable at even the thought of exploring their perspectives on their gender and sexuality, as well as those of society at large, to find another section with a more comfortable topic (hopeful that they will explore their discomfort with sexuality-based issues at a more appropriate moment in their lives). It's never desirable to encourage students to leave, but I'd rather a student invest fully at the outset in a process that they are fully comfortable with than interrupt one mid-stream at the discovery of material or topics that they find uncomfortable. By laying out my concerns (and my approach) up front, I am encouraging students to make informed decisions about whether they are comfortable continuing with the class, given the content matter.

Deborah Brandt's "Remembering Writing, Remembering Reading," and its emphasis on the prestige of reading versus the quotidian uses of writing (such as in private journals), provides me with a point of contention with this burgeoning composition canon. I doubt anyone can argue against reading, but there must be a balance in how we consider using reading and writing in our classrooms. Writing significantly helps to develop burgeoning minds (particularly in those for whom we'd want to encourage enhanced literacy), which is significantly enhanced by daily practice. Hull and Rose have articulated the ways in which we as educators can allow for diverse cultural, ethnic, and economic backgrounds as we develop our responses to student writing, and they have reminded us that moments of hesitation and uncertainty (from the student and the professor) are central to knowledge-making. I am concerned with exploring connections among the experiences of reading short essays on a variety of issues regarding gender and sexuality, reflecting and devising responses accordingly, and discussing the acts of reading and writing in a

classroom setting free of hindrance—but not free from hesitation or uncertainty, of any variety. While I act as a central moderator (in the vein Peter Elbow has described in *Writing Without Teachers*), I am careful to emphasize participation—often utilizing group work to allow for more voices to be heard on a microcosmic level before reassembling the whole for final conclusions and feedback. As Estelle Friedman has shown in “Small Group Pedagogy: Consciousness Raising in Conservative Times,” group work can be an effective tool for eliciting new voices and allowing the classroom to be freed from dogmatic or oppressive viewpoints (such as the potentially interpellative and/or hegemonic ones of the professor). I try very hard to avoid “Jerry Springer Final Thoughts” that encapsulate reading and/or that day’s discussion points, but rather emphasize allowing each student (who wishes to share) to take what s/he has personally learned from the moment; this approach follows on my concerns about any interpellative or doctrinaire moments from professor-to-student. I’ve become more concerned with using our “Blackboard” technology, since I think it can effectively continue classroom discussion outside the four walls of the classroom, while also providing a forum for students to answer further ideas that haven’t been explored in class. I record much of their in-class crossfire in Blackboard discussion forums, while adding space for other spheres of conversation, up to and including responding to group work that is done there. I will not allow anonymous responses, which can lead to uncritical and often mean-spirited comments—I urge students to take “ownership” for their feelings and comments, and to explore them in this space (which can feel less confrontational than the face-to-face in class). I use Blackboard to create free-writing assignments (often from topics fresh from that class’s reading assignment) as well as to stimulate further discussion, and

to refocus the class when youthful energies want to pull away (such as to basketball scores, or a wayward boy/girlfriend). Blackboard (with its discussion and blog spaces) is a fruitful space for expanding our classroom's reach, and allowing New Media to change our pedagogy in enhancing, illuminating ways.

How we respond to students is not only significant in the classroom and in web-based class settings, but also, of course, in the writing. There is a rich vein of influential writing on how to respond to student writing that I find important as a benchmark in establishing my own responses. Elaine Lees' work "Evaluating Student Writing," in 1979, suggests the importance of the fluidity of this process—that we need to recognize writing and evaluating writing as not endings but rather as part of a process (and one that requires our own sensitivity to each step of the process, right down to the composition of one sentence) that begins when we conceive assignments and our expectations of them. Nancy Sommers' "Responding to Student Writing" significantly details the importance of text-specific comments—it is paramount that we not speak in the same generalities or vagueness that we critique in our students, but rather respond with comments that exist "in the text." Sommers also persuasively argues that less can be more—since our comments can create confusion in our students, especially if our small comments about punctuation have equal ink shed over significant comments on thesis (non-)creation. Richard Haswell's "Minimal Marking" echoes these comments, and also points out that the concomitant refocusing of our energies yields a more reactive, productive professor (which matters by the end of the semester)! Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford's "Teachers' Rhetorical Comments on Student Papers" details an exhaustive study of

professorial comments and recognizes that 59% of all comments examined in the study were grade justifications—by which the comments react less to improving the work than explaining why a particular grade was assigned (215). Lynn Bloom’s “Why I (Used to) Hate to Give Grades” details her own reticence to grade, and explains a solution she found useful, up to and including allowing students autonomy in the grading process with self-assessments and conferencing (a suggestion I use at mid-term conference when students are given the opportunity to analyze their own grade expectations, and we can re-calibrate both our expectations and any work deficiencies through this dialogic moment). Driving the process with our comments and not justifying grading is also suggestive of the work of Vivian Zamel (“Responding to Student Writing”), Susan Tschudi, Heidi Estrem, and Patti-Anne Hanlon (“Unsettling Drafts: Helping Students See New Possibilities in Their Writing”), and John C. Bean, whose *Engaging Ideas* gives specific comments he finds useful to drive the writing process and suggests that we become more cognizant of our own grading process (What annoys us? What delights us? Which of our foibles is significant globally in influencing our students’ writing?). Peter Elbow suggests in “High-Stakes and Low-Stakes in Assigning and Responding to Writing” that we consider the significance of the assignment when we consider the scope of our comments, and reminds us of the importance of the dialogic relationship between our students and us. This is a relationship that Pamela Gay stresses in “Dialogizing Response in the Writing Classroom: Students Answer Back,” where she reminds us that commenting is part of a personal relationship being developed with each student, and that we remember this when considering not only the tone of the comments, but also the process of returning papers (allowing time for digestion and student face time with us in

order to establish a student-teacher relationship and reinforce our written responses). Gordon Harvey's "Repetitive Strain: The Injuries of Responding to Student Writing" also reminds us about the importance of the student-teacher relationship (and the implicit trust that develops from the comments we give), but also remarks that the most influential response he ever received as a student was a single question mark (next to a sentence which he was particularly proud of). That question mark was mortifying and corrective to Harvey, but it could have also been damaging had a relationship not been forged between him and the professor (as he asserts was the case). I like to use single question marks, but I deploy them to elicit significant conversation, not to shame or diminish. Every comment should have meaning and consideration behind it (even if it is one mark of punctuation standing alone).

I can declaim my status as professor as much as is theoretically possible, but at semester's end, after I've sent my students along to the next professor in their larger academic process, I must assign grades. I confess to being apprehensive about establishing a hard guideline for grading. I certainly privilege actual writing acumen; participation in class; timely handing in of assignments; participating in the process of revising and scaffolding the techniques of the semester; and the culmination of our journey, the portfolio. I try to make the grades relative and fair; each grade must honor not just the journey the student took, but also the journeys of each of my students. The grades must reflect some hierarchizing of their overall work, and I take that seriously and endemically to each class. I am stingy with As, but equally so with Ds and Fs. Regardless of my assignment, each grade is earned—and I emphasize with each student

from the moment “Go!” that they earn their grades through their diligent work throughout the semester. I am adamant that plagiarized papers fail, and have often stipulated in my syllabus that any plagiarism is grounds for failing the course, without warning. Of course, this requires that I spend a great deal of time discussing (especially in composition) what constitutes plagiarism, an issue that is becoming murkier in academic writing. Kenneth Bleeth and Julie Rivkin, in their work on the David Leavitt plagiarism case, debate issues of imitation, authenticity, and mimesis in writing (and establish the notion that any homosexual treatment of heterosexual material is potentially a source of gay panic)—certainly issues I worry about in my own writing and performance in the classroom. Rebecca Moore Howard’s “The Cultural Work of Plagiarism” articulates a theory that plagiarism is an unwieldy cultural term that is “valorizing an elusive originality, criminalizing imitation, and reinforcing prejudices of gender and sexual preference” that should be put out to pasture. While I recognize the convincing nature of her argument regarding the set of heterodoxical cultural assumptions that prizes certain tropes of authenticity as canonical (and, conversely, merges imitation/“plagiarism” with the racial and sexual minoritized), I am indebted to Elaine Whitaker’s response to Moore Howard, which articulates my own feeling that “her conclusion that plagiarism must become a null set, supplanted by a collection of specific terms, seems to me to lose sight of the mixed state of actual classrooms” (373). That textual appropriations can happen when students do not understand the material is possible, and can generally be detected after some conversation with the student—these are not the students who need discipline, but rather re-education. What I see in a majority of plagiarism cases is a flagrant appropriation of texts (cut-and-paste jobs from obvious sources, like Wikipedia) that

make no effort to create a new point-of-view or perspective. The issue of overreliance on paraphrasing such sources is a greyer area—and one best left to the instructor’s own judgment on a case-by-case basis, but one that still must valorize the importance of the *effort* to create authentic work, and to be aware of your own writing processes (across a semester, and beyond).

Sondra Perl has written, in “Understanding Composing,” about the need to recognize recursiveness in our writing. Using the portfolio method for assessing and grading students gives me the flexibility to allow my students space for recursive movements: to revise, to revisit topics from earlier in the course, to scaffold additional techniques learned throughout the class onto prior writing assignments in ways that create unique writing experiences, even in the process of revision. Ideally, this freedom allows my students to feel unconstrained by the finality of the grade, since I do not assign letter grades to my students on their assignments throughout the semester; rather, I make detailed critiques of the work, often endeavoring to underscore the positive as well as the negative. I firmly believe in the power of “red ink” to maintain some semblance of professorial intent; in dealing with young people who are often in their maiden semester in college, it is important to not coddle them but rather guide them toward a collaborative effort. I find that keeping the ink (literally) red allows them the freedom to explore their voice in their writing and efforts in class while allowing me to give feedback that *matters* (even if this notion differs from what I believe is the current practice in Composition Studies).

Earning the respect of the students (which enables the fostering of these positive relationships) is essential. In early classes I endeavor to create safe space—often prompting that any opinion offered that is potentially controversial is “okay” and “good” and asking for constructive feedback. It’s also important to show my personality and my sense of humor—to humanize the professor they perceive as being behind a lectern into the guy helping them with their writing and moderating their discussions. Such a moment occurred early in my teaching of English 101 one semester. As we were discussing the Baby M case, from 1986, I asked how many of them had actually been born by March, 1986; none of them had. I stammered and sputtered and exclaimed, “Wow. I am getting so old!” This created waves of relieved laughter—a true moment of bonding in displaying my befuddlement and not assigning shame to it. When I pointed out that it meant all of them were roughly the right age to have been conceived in an era of scientific incursion into conception, it cemented our relationship: a professor who will teach but also laugh, and a class free to laugh at the professor but also to learn. That mutual respect is utterly crucial to working with gender and sexuality, and to earning the right to guide their work in meaningful ways to the fuller development of their voices in their reading, writing, and classroom activities. I am indebted to the works of Harvey Weiner and Kenneth Bruffee that have elucidated the importance of developing voice in the classroom and collaborative learning techniques (such as group work assignments) that alter the professor from demagogue to role-player (task-manager, moderator, instigator) in organic ways that cement the importance of a mutually respectful relationship.

The mid-semester conference also provides an opportunity to reinforce the learning processes in the recursive acts of writing in the portfolio, as well as reassuring the students that the rewards are in the process—the journey—and not in the grading. While I see the value in using the checklist as a grading tool (notably espoused in Helen Throckmorton’s “Do Your Writing Assignments Work? Checklist for a Good Writing Assignment”), I feel that any effort to distill the writing process into acts that can be discretely checked off is akin to stripping the grace and character from the journey. Donald Murray has written about the importance of listening in these conferences—and the importance of making students feel as if it is “their” space to speak and collaborate, which echoes the work of Rosemarie Arbur about creating collaborative space in the conference. If I have been successful throughout the semester, I have already begun creating collaborative space for which this conference is a reinforcement, but in some cases this conference becomes a chance to get to know them more; to establish where they stand (both from my perspective and theirs); and to discuss how I can help them take the “next step” in the final weeks of the semester. It’s specious to define dogmatically what that next step is; it varies from student to student, and relies on my holding up my “end of the bargain” in getting to know each of my students.

I am not a fan of dogma, or of lecturing, or of treating my students like repositories demanding my deposits. Rather than be political with my words in the classroom, I am essentially political by choosing to examine gender and sexuality issues that I care about in my classroom, which dovetails in some ways with Paulo Freire and his notion of education as a subjective process. I essay neutrality in my classroom performance, but I

have already made political decisions by choosing texts and loci of discussion (whether as a conversation starter, as the assigned of group work assignments, or in assigned conversation topics on Blackboard). I tell my students on the first day, “I don’t care how bigoted or offensive you are in your writing; I care that we make you a better writer.” Clearly I hope for a more idealistic student response, but my job is not to give a social education, but rather to expose them to issues of literacy through a prism of my choosing—which I choose to be the polyvalent realm of gender and sexuality. I echo Peter Elbow’s call for embracing the contraries we find (in our careers as educators and academics as well as within the makeup of our classrooms), and find his disagreements with David Bartholomae illuminating if onanistic—*anyone* can choose to lecture another on which skills to privilege. I can only hope my own explication of teaching processes is less chiding and insistent on its correctness, while maintaining the mutual respect that, thankfully, the conversations between Elbow and Bartholomae possess.

I enjoy being a gatekeeper to a new journey for these young people—to see the world through different eyes, reading with a different prescription, writing with a new pen. If I’ve succeeded, these students will have new perceptions about their own voices, new perspectives on how they read, new skills in how they conceive of their writing, and new ideas to explore and connect to as they move on to other coursework and other spaces of their lives. Similarly, I will take the encounters from each batch of current students assigned to me and bring the bounty to the next stop on my teaching career, and a new group of students with whom I can share the journey. I am influenced by Mark McBeth’s “Practice Makes Perfect: Learning to Teach as a Graduate Student,” which details the

process of teaching while concomitantly gaining a Ph.D. (as I find myself doing) and recognizing our constant position as a student (if only within our own research and recursive self-examination).

I've espoused my concerns with truth in autobiography and the interpellative characteristics of the classroom, and I have also lionized and privileged the development of the voice that Toby Fulwiler has spoken of. Fulwiler continued to speak about the authentic voice versus the multiple constructions we develop, particularly as academics but implicitly throughout our personal subject positions. Vicki Crowley has written a series of letters that explored her feelings toward her students and the safety of her classroom space while trying to maintain her own authentic voice when confronted with a series of trying encounters—the letters served as a safe, personal space to respond to her circumstances while using a constructed voice to deal “appropriately” with her students. She cites Walter Benjamin about the construction of the past: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’ It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a time of danger...the danger affects both the content of the tradition and its receivers” (255). Ultimately my teaching philosophy must dovetail with my own academic standards—development of a clear, authentic voice; understanding of motivation and the importance of a strong point-of-view; recognition of a plurality of experiences and antecedents that influence and, in the case of the professor, can inculcate the subject. It's not surprising, then, that as I read Peter Elbow's remarks on receiving an award from CCCC, I identify so strongly with his idea: “Throughout my career, it turns out that I've been trying to give ownership of writing to everyone—that is,

to democratize or vernacularize writing” (520). Harkening back to the dawn of 2000, with the chasm of expression between the Butlers and Pollitts, I realize, looking forward, that I am on both of their sides. I cannot apologize for that. Writing belongs to everyone—even to the “bad writers” or the academic “bullshit” recently described by Philip Eubanks and John Schaeffer. I am not at the end of my career—far from it—so my ideas still have room to grow and to bend (indeed, they certainly will throughout the semester detailed in the pages to come). I hope I am willing to listen, and to continue to read both the high and the low, in the hopes of doing authentic research and eliciting authentic voices in my classroom.

September: Pedagogy

August 29, 2006 10:30pm

“Is starting hard? You know it is. I don’t know what you do when you start but I clean my desk. I make a lot of stupid appointments that I make sound important. Avoidance. Delay. Denial. I’m always scared that I’m not gonna know what to do. It’s a terrifying moment. And then when I start, I’m always amazed, ‘So that wasn’t so bad.’” –Frank Gehry

My mother has a framed poster of a Frank Gehry building in her office at work. It’s a treasured piece—one she took over two years to frame because she needed the *right* frame. She bought it on the weekend I took her to New York for her birthday—well, it was the weekend after her birthday, which is how she ended up with a New York trip rather than flowers and candy. As compensation, she was my escort to the Guggenheim opening of the Frank Gehry exhibit. I had apprehensions about bringing her there—her clothes, while stylish, would not resemble the couture ensembles around us; her hair, tousled with flecks of self-inflicted hair dye, would cause her consternation and manic primping before we left the cab on Fifth Avenue. But my greatest apprehension was reserved for the subject—the wacky ministrations of Frank Gehry, splattered amid the vodka-embalmed corpses in Christian Dior at the Guggenheim. Would my New Hampshire mother—hardly a simpleton but rather an anti-snob—appreciate popsicle-stick models and hand drawings masquerading as art? She surprised me, as she often did. Does. Did.

August 31, 2006 12:06am

I'm teaching in 8 hours. I am woefully unprepared. It's been just a few hours over a week since my mother expired. My boyfriend and I are watching *Project Runway*, much as we would have last week if the call hadn't come through that my mother was dead, on the heels of her brother's funeral. I have to teach tomorrow, even though there'll be no kid gloves. My colleagues clearly heard the gossip—many were treating me like fragile porcelain today as I spent what seemed an eternity handling last-second, pre-semester minutiae—fixing bookstore orders and photocopying handouts on a perpetually overheated departmental machine. People gave me leeway today; my students will not provide the same luxury. I can't decide if that is a good thing or not.

Comment

Preparing for the first day is often about housekeeping—waiting for the copier to open up, adding last-minute room changes and textbooks to the syllabus, looking for a roster to take attendance by. It's not nearly as onerous as it seems to someone who is barely sleeping.

August 31, 2006 7:09am

I've woken up to discover weeks of unmitigated sandal-wearing have left my left heel painfully cracked to the point of providing me with a limp. This will further mark me as queer in less than an hour at the front of my classroom.

Comment

Of course the question of what marks you as queer is a bit rhetorical, since any visual referents indulge in baser stereotyping (Reed Woodhouse's piece in "On the Political Implications of Using the Word Queer" refers to queer pedagogy as "a tendency to wave your hands a lot while you talked" (57)), but first impressions are relevant, especially to a queer professor—and most especially to those who traffic in bolder color prints, sibilant essences, or a fondness for singing Madonna in class. Still, I am mindful of Joseph Litvak's analysis of Lee Edelman's argument that gay male bodies constitute heterosexual public spectacle, and therefore constitute a "threat" to heteronormative evaluation, although "fear of limp" is perhaps less queer-inscribed than esoteric.

August 31, 2006 9:12am

The first class was as painful and frustrating as I might have predicted. It's first period—an ungodly 8:15am—in an August classroom with no ventilation and one paltry fan keeping the back row in gasps and zephyrs. My opening joke about whips and chains has excited no one. I'm wearing my mother's amethyst on a chain around my neck.

Amethyst was neither her gemstone (that would be emerald) nor her color (that would be the bluish shade of peridot) but it was a treasured necklace, for some reason. It matched the Jones New York aubergine frock she was laid out in—a shift with sheer sleeves that she felt awkward but glamorous in. My brother and I bought her the gown, and won out in the negotiations over what she would be interred in. It pains me to think that such a dress was charred and burned when my mother was set ablaze Monday morning, but no more so than the fact that I signed the authorization to set my mother on fire.

The class is very quiet—which I should have expected at 8:15am. Likely, there are a great many people who have no desire to be there, but were given the section as a last resort in Schedule-ville. I tried being friendly. I tried being mean-spirited. I tried to emphasize how difficult the material could be, while simultaneously mentioning how much fun I expected we'd have demystifying canonical texts. I even said the word queer—to blank expressions. Frustration! Of course, when I asked what “medieval and early modern Literature” meant, I was met with the blankest slates. Ever. One enterprising young man, sitting near the back, told me 1300-1700. No one disagreed. No one agreed. They don't care, and this morning I failed as a professor. I didn't care either. I will definitely need to rectify my lack this afternoon—at least providing the simulacrum of concern and professionalism, even if my mind is elsewhere.

Comment

When your students don't care, it is time to shake things up. For small groups, assign a "captain" and a "secretary," who can make groups more efficient and make students take them more seriously. Also, walk around and listen in on conversations; be actively monitoring their group dynamics.

Getting students to physically move can shake up the energy of the room. When holding a debate, my former professor Al Filreis would always demand that students physically move themselves to one side of the room or the other, with no possibility of abstaining (short of leaving the room). Another tack I have taken is to have whomever speaks pick the next speaker. This puts the pressure onto them to call on each other, and hopefully

takes attention off you as the go-between for each idea. It's also conducive to good discussion to move to a circular format, so people can see each other, and avoid the urge to speak to you, at the lectern (or the front of the room). When students direct comments to me too often, I will move myself into the middle, or to another side of the room, in order to blend with other students potentially listening.

I've found that the first few classes really set the tone for participation. It's so hard with a dead room to refrain from filling the silent space, but offering opportunities to open discussion are often tempting to students looking to impress the professor without having to generate response to "harder" material.

Email sent August 31, 2006 10:00am

To: dunfeyj (Mom)

My first class went well--they are so decaffeinated for 8am, but I am going to work on them! I am hanging around till my next teaching at 1:55, but Foey is going to be here for lunch, and everyone is keeping an eye on me, even though no one realizes I notice. I am wearing your amethyst chain under my shirt; Foey says it suits me. I miss you.

10:01 am: Email still hasn't come back to sender, addressee unknown

September 1, 2006 11:46am

On top of being a lousy professor, now I am a lame chronicler, opting for sleep over observing. I am exhausted. I suspect it is not entirely grief nor is it the lack of sleep over the last ten days but rather that my body is physically exhausted from obligations and expectations. At the front of the classroom I am a performer. I feed off the energy of reacting to my students, of guiding them near and around the material but never demagogically divining the answers. A fear expressed to me a few hours before I delivered my mother's eulogy was that my "natural flair" for drama would overtake honoring my mother. I leave it to historians to determine how my speech went, but for me, the act of suppression—of speaking as poetically as paroxysms of grief would allow without performing—has left me a bit traumatized. I wonder if people see me "performing" grief. I sense I am being observed (at least by those who are privy to "my secret") and it is interfering with my actions (much as the uncertainty principle points to regarding the behavior of those knowing they are being observed—or is that the observer effect?).

I was hoping to drive students out of my Classical Literature class. Thirty-seven is more than I anticipated, and for the amount of writing and dynamic class interaction I want for that section, it's too many. So, I was rigorous on day one, making no apologies for my rigid attendance policy. I positively reveled in how expensive the texts are—explaining that the class is going to be taught at a higher level than perhaps they were used to. I forced them to read "The Descent of Inanna" and sign up for presentations on the poetry of Catullus and Sappho beginning next Thursday—the class after they have a 2-3 page

paper due. I stacked the deck in favor of eliminating the dilettantes and the lazy dharma bums alike. Instead, they turned out to be lively and engaged—with multiple voices discussing Inanna, and many people staying after to discuss their enthusiasm and excitement over my vision of the course.

I relayed this tale to my department chair and friend, Chris Suggs, after I finished my two classes. I told him about my first day, about its lack of controversy. I told him how quiet and small my college composition class was—only twenty bodies, most of them borderline for a pulse, with one student in attendance who'd failed last semester and had blindly ended up in my section yet again. He loudly proclaimed he was going to change sections, and I feared insurrection for a moment, until I realized the rest of the room was carved from a solid block and had taken on a classroom pose in the marble frieze. No one listened to him, and he quietly slinked away after class let out, with a feeble handshake for my advice (“Feel free to stay, but if you’ll be uncomfortable, by all means switch to another section.”)

I wanted to be more interested in this unusual situation—this confrontation with a student, a failure—did I fail him, or did he fail me? The young man was very friendly and vivacious in class, but often failed to turn in work. He even seemed to realize he was failing at the end—indicating in the letter introducing his portfolio that he knew there were holes in his work. Still, my concern was to avoid confrontation and now my concern is in whether I failed him—did I fail to make him take interest in my material, and in being a better writer?

Chris advised me to be more forgiving of myself; he advised taking as much solace in this journal as possible, while maintaining an academic pose. One thing I admire about Joan Didion's recent work on her mourning process—*The Year of Magical Thinking*—is the way in which she maintained an intellectual posture—using her nonfiction brain to ask questions, wonder about the incomprehensible, and do research to find some comfort in other people's work, and the answers they provided.

This project is intended to delve into the ways that gender and sexuality manifest themselves in three classrooms—classics, medieval/early modern, and composition. It is meant to explore the antecedents and concerns I bring, to see how I influence my students—no matter my teaching philosophy of nondemagogic speech from the lectern. Now, the nodes of interpellation/seduction that I'm expecting to discover also comprise another sphere—mourning. How will my mourning seduce my classroom? My texts? My writing? Is this a competition between my unfathomable grief and my intellectual curiosities? Perhaps I'll figure that out in the next semester, one where I feel I am teetering between the joys of the classroom and the depths of funereal gloom. I am bearing my own witness to trauma and grief; the question is how reliable a witness I can be.

Comment

The observer effect (often mistaken for the Heisenberg uncertainty principle) states that the very act of being observed is cause to distort the behaviors of those under observation. The notion of bearing witness to one's own behavior creates a lot of

“metas” to unpack—perhaps the easiest throughline is simply to identify that there is a difference between chronicling and analyzing, and that my (un)reliability is precisely the point of my testimony—and one that Coetzee demonstrated so aptly in “Truth in Autobiography.”

It’s funny that on this day I felt so unprepared—but allowed the mourning to “course” through me in ways that allowed it to do the performing. The run-in with Marty¹ certainly contributed to my doldrums when I composed this entry, as it dredged up thoughts on the grading process, and interactions with students. Jack Slay’s “No Extra Credit for You” captures many of my feelings on grading—and fairness. Marty was a student with potential—but he failed himself, and no amount of me pushing, prodding, or dangling extra credit would change that; following the standard of the class, he’d failed. Slay talks about a student who, perched precariously between D and F all semester, blows the final, and then begs for extra credit to pass. There’s always a temptation to take the cowardly way out and pass someone, but if you’ve earned an F, you should receive one. Of course, as with all grading situations, each student should be judged while taking into account the full scale of his accomplishments—one blown exam should be balanced against other moments of success. Seeing Marty—and dealing with his attitude—only exacerbated my already tenuous relationship with grading.

¹ Marty is not his real name, nor will any student’s real name be used in this work. Pseudonyms have been assigned arbitrarily, reflecting no subjectivity or denotation of that student’s identity—nor should any attempt be made to infer such subjectivity from the names chosen.

There are ways in which the grading process (and the “ones that got away”) link to Melanie Klein and her notions of internal objects—both good and bad ones. Her uses of these objects culminated significantly in a 1940 paper in which she connected them (and the imbuing of love and hate in these objects) from the depressive position to the nature of mourning:

The poignancy of the actual loss of a loved person is, in my view, greatly increased by the mourner’s unconscious phantasies of having lost his ‘internal good’ objects as well. He then feels that his internal ‘bad’ objects predominate and his inner world is in danger of disruption. We know that the loss of a loved person leads to an impulse in the mourner to reinstate the lost loved object (Freud, Abraham). In my view, however, he not only takes into himself (reincorporates) the person whom he has just lost, but also reinstates his internalized good objects (ultimately his loved parents)... (353)

It is not lost on me that, by internalizing my mother’s corpse and memory as good objects, I was also reinscribing her status as a loved parent (and concomitantly as a good internal object). It is perhaps in this way that I felt so exhausted—mourning our parents is a doubly traumatic event, and forces examination of a lifetime’s good objects in order to reclassify and reinscribe (doubly) the good parent.

September 5, 2006 11:30am

I am ill. A new wrinkle—a cold—affecting my classroom. This morning’s session on *Beowulf* was truncated in deference to my ravaged voice and mind—a lecture on the textual history, and introduction of some of the valuable tropes (*wergild* and *scop*) that will be explored in future classes. I’ve been thinking about *wergild* outside of *Beowulf*—this idea about rules to follow with specific penalties determined by the quality of the crime and the station of the victim. In the aftermath of my mother’s passing, the recriminations of her intestacy are beginning to reverberate—bits of greed and a

surprising lack of communication are palpable, and I have little energy to cope with the indignities of family. Concomitantly, secrets and lies from my mother's lifetime are beginning to emerge from their shadows—indignities committed, debts unrepaid, slanders not recuperated. Thinking about Beowulf and the relationship between Grendel and his mother—a relationship of “monsters” but one that follows matrilineal notions of family structure—I think of my mother, now struck down, and wonder if there is a way for me to avenge her—even if it means attacking the hero. Is *wergild* unjust, or should I demand a pound of flesh from those who've maligned or poisoned me or my mother? And need I pay a pound of my own to clear the debts of my mother, and her mother before her, and the sins throughout my family's gnarled tree? I suspect my class would have found this angle far more intoxicating than the lecture I gave, but I am not willing to annex their affections using my dead mother as a ploy or a crutch.

A larger problem has developed in my classics section. In a class designed for 30, I have 38 students. I have frontloaded the syllabus to drive people out in the first two weeks—ergo, we have a paper due at the second class, presentations in the next two classes after that, and a general sense of boredom planned. Today I am planning to read a 40-minute lecture on *Gilgamesh*, with the hopes of bringing my numbers down to a more palatable sum. Alas, thanks to my own loss of the thread in the week prior to classes starting, I did not copy the correct version of *Gilgamesh* for my students, and so they were given an assignment to write a paper on masculinity issues in the text when the excerpt in their Norton edition only includes the tale of the flood. I'm not sure at all how I am going to explain my way out of that one. Grief claims another victim. Parts of today's activities

are going to reflect that error (rather than hide it) and read the freshly copied, correct version in class. I am going to incorporate this as part of my “versioning”—the idea that not everything means the same thing to everyone and so these two different translations of *Gilgamesh* reflect the theme of the course. We shall see.

Ultimately, I just don’t want to be here today. I have no powers of persuasion, no ability to shed light or guide understanding. I am numb emotionally, and now ravaged physically by the forces of coughing and phlegm and mucus (oh my!).

Comment

I’ve not been using the word “seduction,” preferring to think about the implications of interpellation, for instance, but the ideas of “annexing affections” of students utilizes vocabulary that brings me into relation with “seduction.” Talking about seduction in the classroom is fraught with danger, not the least of which is Jane Gallop’s suggestion that “pederasty is undoubtedly a useful paradigm for classic Western pedagogy. A greater man penetrates a lesser man with his knowledge. The student is an empty receptacle for the phallus; the teacher is the phallic fullness of knowledge” (Gallop 1982 118). I’m not sure if current Western pedagogy can incorporate the variety of phalluses and openings available in the student/teacher pornocopia (if a male student penetrates a female professor, is he more knowledgeable? Are anal openings more classic than vaginal?), but still, Gallop’s suggestion (sans imagery) dovetails with my own caution about filling empty receptacle(s) with personal pedagogy. Michele Aina Barale, in “Romance of Class and Queers: Academic Erotic Zones,” offers a more focused explication of the difficult negotiations of a queer professor (or subjectivity) with students who may be looking for a

“gay-gogue” to accept pedagogical offering without question. Barale questions how we can keep an authentic identity in the classroom (an issue that is exacerbated currently by the proliferation of social networking websites in which a professor’s personal information, tastes, and peccadilloes can become immediately accessible by students). The literal question of seduction is easily answered (don’t do it!) but the metaphorical issues raised are provocative and far-reaching. Maia Ettinger’s “The Pocahontas Paradigm” details not just questions of gender and sexuality but also of dominance in race and class in the development of pedagogy and deployment of grades, assignments, and commentary from the front of the classroom—a thoroughly useful text from which to make judgments in deploying one’s own pedagogy.

Email sent to an old college friend, September 5, 2006 1:25pm

I’m pretty pissed off at her right now, on top of all the mourning and the thunderstruck expressions I seem to be giving. I’m trying to balance teaching, writing my dissertation, taking Orals, and now assisting in the disbursement of the estate all the while trying to mourn--individually, collectively, and inappropriately. It’s pretty odd.

Thanks for the note. The words collectively of my friends have helped, and the words individually have made me feel loved, which is the most basic need I’ve got right now. If this is Winnicott’s holding environment, I’m being given some room to play.

Email from former professor, September 5, 2006

Teaching and diss are perfect for focusing on other things. But they ain't therapy, of course.

September 5, 2006 7:45pm

I am physically drained from the long day at the office. It's unfortunate that my English 101 composition class is my last one, given that they are so lively and responsive to the gender issues that are specifically brought up in their class. I began today with an exercise I usually use on the first day, but eschewed because of Marty's first-day presence. I drew a starfish—or what passes for a starfish from my artistically-challenged repertoire. My students then free-wrote for ten minutes on what they saw. Many saw a starfish, but others saw a star; still another saw a sponge. Today one young lady, Melanie, saw deformity. I use the exercise to explain that nothing is as distinct as it may appear, and to respect everyone else's viewpoint, no matter how sure you are it is a starfish. A badly drawn starfish, at that.

The second free-write assignment—the one intended to pull out our readings from Susan Sontag (“Beauty”) and Margaret Atwood (“The Female Body”)—was simply “Parts.” This topic elicited many confused looks and follow-up questions (“What do you mean by ‘Parts’?”), looking for any guidance. I provide none, thought: extrapolate away! Linda has become an active “looker,” constantly looking up at me, quizzically, smiling, laughing. She has become, at this early juncture, my barometer for whether my jokes have fallen flat or whether they “get” what I am talking about. Linda seemed a bit perplexed, but gamely wrote away.

After we discussed parts (“auto parts,” “spare parts,” “parts of the renal system”!), I introduced the connections to the Sontag & Atwood pieces, which are concerned with the way the female body is socially manufactured for purposes of classification, with an emphasis on conventional beauty. Their group assignment was to answer this question: “What is the most valuable part of a woman’s body?”

Predictably, this drew wild laughs and shocked expressions. Four groups debated and answered, with two arguing that a woman’s mind is most important, while the other two went the opposite direction, naming “vagina” and “reproductive system,” respectively. That the all-male group chose vagina and the all-female group (composition of groups was entirely voluntary, so I had nothing to do with that happy accident) strongly argued that the mind is most important to any body led to heated debate. Antwan was strongly concerned that the word *female* was the key to the question, and that the reproductive organs were most keenly gendered. Janie and Veronica, from the all-female group, and Melanie and Marybeth (from the mixed group that also answered “mind”) were adamant that the *body* was the crucial term in the question, and that although the mind was also valuable to a male body, it was still of paramount importance to privilege it in this debate. I hope they show as much fire and insight in writing their papers, which I am collecting Thursday. Once students began relaxing with the material, they immediately blossomed into skilled, passionate debaters. Exciting!

Comment

Assigning regular free-writing is useful for remembering that composition class is first and foremost about developing writing skills, and then about developing a POV. I am

reminded of Christopher Bollas' discussions of free association as a primary goal of psychoanalysis—and since the classroom is such an effective holding environment, using the tropes of free association is relevant and useful. Harriet Malinowitz has cautioned that there is a dilemma for gay students in free-writing, but I'd like to think that the dilemma she refers to (of accidental uncloseting, for instance) is a bit anachronistic—and even if it is not, using free-writing as a springboard to conversation is not enforced on an individual basis. Malinowitz also points to writing as a space for GLB students to “rewrite the story in their own terms,” which reverberates as sound advice for *all* students. That my exhaustion is so evident in this entry is relevant in how Winnicott cautions us about the importance of relaxation to making free association work as a palliative space—and certainly my ability to create that for myself and my students is hindered if I am unable to maintain energy in the classroom.

September 7, 2006 8:55am

I am giving a quiz on *Beowulf* right now. The first question, “Which is the more dangerous antagonist for Beowulf: Grendel or Grendel's mother?” is not causing many waves around the room. The second question, on the other hand, is causing a flurry of issues: “There is also an interesting tension throughout the epic between Christian and pagan sensibilities and beliefs. The poet is obviously writing in a Christian time and very possibly even a Christian place, like a monastery. However, the poem is from another time, when pagan beliefs ruled.”

Communicating clearly may be a healthy challenge in a “normal” classroom, but when the professor's throat is coated in phlegm and can't speak, it's quite another story!

Luckily at John Jay, virtually all classrooms are equipped with e-podiums, which are fully functional computers, overhead projectors, DVD/VHS players, and monitors. So, in addition to chronicling this moment here in Word, I am also using this system to communicate with students via the overhead, and privately by typing 90 words a minutes on Word. One student, Jacob, who wears a yarmulke, has no notions of what being Christian means, and wishes to be excused from the question on those grounds. Another student, Angela, objects on grounds that she shouldn't have to think about paganism. Frankly I am a bit baffled by both students, but feel I must respect their cultural/moral stances, even as I make them answer the question. If you are in a college classroom, you may be exposed to ideas that are different than your own. Whether you agree or not, it is paramount that you respect the right to opine differently.

Jacob was very agreeable when I pointed out that his grade would not be based on his knowledge of Christianity or paganism, but rather on his reference to the text, and the ways religion/rites are deployed throughout. Angela seemed more baffled—I suspect her emboldened move to the front of the room gave her a false sense of entitlement that I would acquiesce to her demand not to complete the question. Still, with a small, weak smile befitting my ravaged health, I made her smile back. A little manipulation never hurt a student on the cusp of seeing something frightening and new, did it?

The quiz also appears to be exposing just how few have been reading perhaps our simplest text. This saddens me, as they seem so enthusiastic and it's overruling my urge to hit the snooze button at 7:00 every Tuesday and Thursday. I will grow to dread these

early risers if they don't start bringing it. Alack! I am prejudging them based on pens lying dormant on the desks; perhaps they will surprise me.

Comment

Religion and faith-based argument emerge regularly in my class, and it's a distraction only in the sense that we already have such a limited time to discuss the wide variety of gender and sexuality issues that emerge from over twenty readings and external research by each student that converge in each class session. Raquel Cook's "Beyond Tolerance" discusses the ways in which, in trying to teach a world literature unit designed to pique curiosity, the terms of faith and religion managed to subsume the class discussion (which she argues is not a bad thing at that level, but which would eat alive the discursivity of gender and sexuality, and the work of writing in a composition class at the college level).

September 7, 2006 5:45pm

I am still a bit dazed from my afternoon. My first batch of presentations on Sappho went surprisingly well, not to mention that I am beginning to see the fruits of this endeavor—seeing the ways that, without my prompting or pedagogically interfering, the presence of gender and sexuality issues began to emerge organically (without my prodding or interpellation). Two students believed that Sappho must be a man because she explicitly wrote to another woman, while another asked why the term "lesbian" came from Sappho of Lesbos when she was likely bisexual. How can you argue with a point as logical as that? "Bisexuals should be lesbians," I replied, to the chortles and cackles of my class, who seemed a bit taken aback that this content was emerging. I am trying to demur on making any comments until we handle Catullus on Tuesday, but the translatability of

these poets—both from Greek/Latin to English and from canonical classics to modern reading material (with alternative readings)—is crucial to my students’ understanding their power as modern readers.

One comment that set me off in unexpected ways regarding the motherless professor was when one student, Diego (who, like Linda in my composition class, has become my facial barometer for gauging classroom reactions), asked about roses, and whether they were devalued now as poetic objects because of reality programming like “The Bachelor.” I began responding, intending to keep it simple, by talking about supply/demand and how at my local convenience store/sidewalk florist, two dozen roses costs less than a bunch of gladiolas, because the roses are produced at a far greater rate, because more people want roses, since they are generally conditioned to think of them as significant and meaningful, because of poems like Sappho’s, or quotes from *Romeo and Juliet* (“A rose by any other name would smell as sweet”). But then my mind wandered to my stepfather, Jim, who has told me that now, in honor of my mother, whom he used to shower in flowers on special days, he plans to purchase a dozen roses and tie a note to the stem of each, asking the recipient to pass along a random act of kindness after receipt of his rose. He plans to do that on Valentine’s Day and Christmas, and on their upcoming September 15 anniversary. I relayed this tale, minus the details of how recently dead my mother is, and found myself wandering off, while my class stared, perhaps piteously, perhaps sympathetically, but quiet as a funeral home basement. This one class presents a microcosm of both the way my mourning affects my teaching, and the ways sexuality and

gender concerns emerge organically. A perfect storm of action, and yet, thanks to the lethargy of mourning, I was unenthused to share with this journal.

I am finding it very difficult to write after my afternoon classes. I am physically exhausted. I am emotionally drained. Just now I began hallucinating visions of my mother being Malkovich-superimposed on everyone on the sidewalk at 14th and 8th, leaving me utterly bewildered, and barely restraining sobs on the street. Mourning is hard on the body—the bags below my eyes have not diminished; my skin is sallow; my body tone not quite as firm as before my mother died and the funeral pyre was impaled in my brain. That image was overripe. Still, it is going to be a challenge to continue writing—to invest in this enterprise and its still-developing valences without simply throwing up my hands and deciding “I want to sleep” or “I want to forget.”

The final composition class had lots of exciting discussion, stemming from a continuation of Margaret Atwood’s “The Female Body” through to the assigned reading, an excerpt from Susan Faludi’s “Backlash,” but the moment that stood out came from the beginning of class. After a free-writing assignment of “Feminist,” an active contingent (Melanie, Linda, Marybeth, Antwan) proceeded nearly to hijack control, vibrantly debating whether we owe a debt of gratitude to feminists or whether they are merely annoying.

I intervened to share an anecdote about meeting Ms. Atwood a few months ago, and that she was rather cold and distant to me, until I mentioned I was teaching two of her nonfiction pieces, “The Female Body” and “Pornography” (which is to be taught later

this semester). Atwood's reply to me was, "Well, the women will understand it." So, what I posited to the class was, "Does that mean I don't get it, or does it mean I am a woman?" After the expected gales of laughter, students struggled with the semantics, although one student, Dodi, made a comment that created a ripple of tension. He said, "Well, perhaps maybe she was kind, saying that like if you are gay or something then you get the woman's position." He looked me dead in the eye, as if daring me to come out or to confirm a suspicion. And indeed, as I looked around, the tense quiet that descended seemed to be daring me to settle their collective bar bet on my sexuality. Alas, I said nothing, and Melanie immediately pounced on the comment to assail Dodi for not understanding shifting psychologies across gender and sexuality. Well, actually Melanie told him he was thinking narrowly, but certainly as my points come across regarding how polarizing categories like gender can be without acknowledging the contributing factors that race, ethnicity, religion, economic background, etc., can bring to the table that makes each of us unique.

I went off on a unique tangent of my own, describing Lacan and the Other as broadly as possible, and trying to let the class know that there are myriad ways to consider female sexuality, literally, spectrally, and psychologically. Linda wanted to understand whether all women were Other in Lacanian terms, and I told her to Google it (before I nodded a bit). Is anyone who isn't with penis Other? And where are the other distinctions to Othering people? I got a bit lost with the tangent, but the feverish note-taking did my heart good, as I wondered if Lacan would bump up the Yahoo! Search rankings later today.

The question posited for group work emanated out of and responded to the Faludi reading: “What’s wrong with being a Barbie doll?” Class ended before each group could comment, so this question is still hanging for Tuesday. The two groups who did present went a bit broadly with the responses (“Oh, she’s conservative and boring and teaches little girls that no waists and no hips and blond hair are the only paradigms worth considering”) but I have hopes for Tuesday livening things up.

Many students seemed eager to have me accept handwritten work—despite the entreaties of the syllabus that I will take no such work. I gave a compromise—those with handwritten work could turn it in but it must be typed and resubmitted, or the grade would be dramatically lowered. From my first glance at them, I suspect I made an error with my generosity of spirit, as some works appear to have been generated on the fly in the classroom.

Comment

Well, I had no intention of being bi-phobic, but that comment about Sappho could certainly be taken as such. Michele Eliason has written about the prevalence of such bi-phobia (although not from queer subjects) in the classroom, and her findings certainly jibe with the response of the students (although the laughter could just as simply have emanated from the political incorrectness of my comment). Michelle Gibson, Martha Marinara, and Deborah Meem have noted that “current theories of radical pedagogy stress the constant undermining, on the part of both professors and students, of fixed

essential identities” (69), and certainly this moment blurred fixed sexual identities for the students and blurred the pedagogy of improvisation for the professor.

Susan Stryker has discussed the notion of queer as an inclusive term, and one that would encompass gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual identity under one umbrella.

Disclosing such a self-designation has its advantages and confers dilemmas. Harriet Malinowitz has argued that she is disabusing her classroom of its ignorance by inserting a queer orientation in the room. Susan Talburt notes, though, that “the logic of taking a gay or lesbian subject position is linked to oppositional pedagogies that would challenge ideologies of the instructor as universal bearer of truth, knowledge as disinterested, and pedagogy as properly detached from political concerns” (55). I’d like to think that we’ve evolved in the academy past what Mary Elliott characterized as the “double terror” faced by gay and lesbian professors (both of breaking away from “heterosexual” institutional privilege and of exposure as potential deviant and subversive in institutional terms), but I also recognize what Karen Kopelson has said on identity and performance: “Because even performances of the most inessential selves are drawing on essentialized knowledges, they always risk reincorporation as and into essence; we are not in control of how the texts of our selves are finally read and received...” (31). I depend on my students making their own decisions about texts and statements; I do not depend on institutional knowledge to do so. In making this distinction, I am aligned with Deborah Britzman’s positions in “Is There a Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Thinking Straight”: we must work to create classroom space that recognizes the other through self-recognition and an awareness of proliferating identities in the classroom—identities that transcend

not just the essential images of LGBT/Queer, but also all identity constructions (such as the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality). Britzman encourages a personalized approach to each classroom, which considers strategy and working within the system rather than considering the university system as one to rebel against. Queer subjectivity is nonnormalizing, but it is not necessarily radical, either. In my classroom, this queer subjectivity is asking students to disrupt their current conception of normal, not to change it to one *idée fixe*.

My muffled sobs along the sidewalk recall a sequence in Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, when she refers to Eric Lindemann's 1944 study of grief and describes the "sensations of somatic distress" that each of us could recognize in our own hysteria—the waves of grief (28). I muffled a lot of sobs throughout this period, though I suspect my own denial (working through the lens of focusing on teaching) influenced the relative lack of discussion of my emotional state in these passages.

September 11, 2006 9:12 pm

I've had a long weekend, attending a family wedding and falling off a ten-foot retaining wall and rolling down a steep, thorny hill, which resulted in my body being covered in welts, scabs, scratches, and bruises. I hurt. A lot. Yet, none of that pain seems to compare to the general anesthetic I just needed to get through reading and responding to my composition students' first set of papers. The best of the lot—all three of them—still hyperventilate their way through the work, but have some organization and feeling for responding to the material. The worst of them—half of them all—seem to think a book report or a riff on why women are unequal is in order. Often this was done in longhand

or without a spell-check. One thing they all share is a lack of attention to the craft of writing, often reflecting an “oral” style that is better recited than read. So much pain! I need to determine how harsh to be on the grading, as well as how to use the criticism as a motivator for my students—they’ve had such invigorating sessions this past week in discussing the material, yet they seem unwilling to do the work of the class—the composition. It will sadden me to have to withhold the discussion time to spend entire sessions covering basic thesis construction. Still, my responsibility as an educator necessitates taking that extra time to instruct them as writers—an obligation that is less pronounced in my literature classes, where I have a reasonable expectation of their readiness to tackle challenging readings and write about them with some skill.

Comment

Thinking about grading—which is a constantly recursive process (one that involves ongoing revisiting or repeating)—leads me to thinking about strategic ways of approaching the student relationship. Chris Anson has suggested that we be sensitive to issues of timing and purpose in our grading strategies—and indeed, it is important that I am constantly aware of a scaffolded set of relationships (student/teacher, student/writing process, teacher/grading, etc.) that can teeter on the brink with a poorly timed comment or a ruthless set of red marks on punctuation vs. content, for instance. Richard Straub reminds us to think about our relationships with our students as continuing dialogues—and our grading should reflect this notion, which enables us, as Lynn Bloom urges, to think of grades not as something worth hating, but as an opportunity to continue dialogue with our students.

September 12, 2006 12:20pm

Sometimes the best classes are the ones totally improvised. So tired last night, so depressed over how bad the writing and quiz taking has been, I planned nothing to close out *Beowulf* this morning, thinking instead that perhaps something would hit me on the subway. During my interminable stay on the A this morning (a fire at Roosevelt station had caused some signal disruptions that tripled my usual commute), a thought occurred to me for a group activity—a modified trial, with four teams conducting cases. On one hand, a prosecution and defense of the titular character for animal cruelty. On the other hand, a prosecution and defense of Grendel's mother for murder, with the defense directed to use a temporary insanity defense. The groups were given 30 minutes to prepare, during which I heard multiple comments betraying a lack of reading ("Grendel's mother doesn't have a name?" "Beowulf killed a dragon, too?" "But if Beowulf is king, what happened to Hrothgar?"), and communications that reflected classmates educating each other on the fly during the group experience. I am not sure I could have choreographed this better, but the question of community good emerged. I brought up questions of what constitutes an animal. The class began discussing each other's presentations—members of the team defending Grendel's mother began to realize they had similar concerns to those prosecuting Beowulf—specifically about what can be legislated regarding vengeance and what constitutes a monster, whether that simply be an unconventional person or persons on the fringe of strait-laced society. Grendel and his mother descend from Cain, but are treated (until this discussion) as mythic beasts. Aren't they potentially people outside of the conventional realms? I closed the class by suggesting that perhaps all Grendel's mother really needed was some trick-or-treater to

knock on her door one Halloween, instead of demonizing her as the “monstrous Hell-bride.” While the class let the materials flow through them organically, I seized the moment to argue for tolerance and respect, and to see *Beowulf* not just as the exemplum of great leadership and a rowdy war epic, but also as a space for seeing different social types. Beowulf himself argued in lines 1384-5, “Wise sir, do not grieve. It is always better/to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning.” This passage, which none of the class read in their buttress of their cases, supported both Beowulf and Grendel’s mother. It supported me deciding not to quit this semester to indulge in my grief; mind you, I am not intending to go off on blood holiday for vengeance, but I’m finding a middle ground where I can use my mourning in productive ways. It’s this journal. It’s my classroom. It’s my mother’s amethyst around my neck, like a beacon guiding me to my hero’s quest. This would be my Lancelot moment in the film version.

Comment

Improvising is one verb I am comfortable with. Vangie Bergum has written about Sally Gadow’s philosophical themes on relational pedagogy, where we embody our teaching, and improvisation represents a “doing” of our own selves (and where our selves and our teaching are interdependent and interlocated). Improvising is not just significant to keeping the organic flow of the class moving (even when it is unplanned discourse) but also to moving the class to challenge its own “flow”—particularly when their groupspeak starts producing heteronormative speech (which is often a component of the composition classroom, where the one presumed shared identity is a heterosexual one). I am cognizant of Celia Kitzinger’s “Speaking as a Heterosexual,” which details the quotidian ways speech is conglomerated to constitute heterosexual (hegemonic) space. Sensitivity

to all utterances in the classroom can yield the self-interrogation I hope to instigate in each student.

In the vein of improvising must also exist an awareness of boundaries and appropriateness: this assignment made complete sense because, at the John Jay College for Criminal Justice, an awareness of (and lensing through) systems of crime and punishment is germane to my students' career goals.

September 12, 2006 7:48pm

It is so hard to sit and write after a long day of teaching, teaching, teaching, and smiling, smiling, smiling, as if my whole world wasn't just over, or at the very least tattered right now. It was an afternoon of treacherous emotions—honest, authentically rendered, but traitorous—that may or may not have lasting impact on my classes as I face them down the line.

I am finding that blindness is exhausting me even more than my now-quotidian weariness. I squint, I wander, I wonder. I feel like a bumpkin. Luckily, in allowing my classics students to present on Catullus, I had the chance to sit in the corner, quasi-student Rob, and call on the speakers, resisting the urge to correct their myriad (I counted 11) pronunciations of Gaius Valerius's surname, resisting the urge to correct their oft-cloudy interpretations of the work (*Catullus is not Lesbia's father, Corinna!*). I had one exciting presentation—from Wilbur, who saw the prostitution in Poem 85 and ran with it, fearlessly positing that Catullus is appalled by her sexual depravities (with anyone but

him). I could see the glow on his face not only when I praised his report, but also when I got up to present my own talk on Catullus in which I used his poem as one of the points of comparison between the Charles Martin translation in our Norton edition and the new Peter Green translation, which is a bit more determined in spelling out Lesbia's penchant for Roman handjobs. This is a class that has shrunk from its original 37 to 30, and become a more cohesive unit for it—the sense of surviving my two-week paper-and-presentation boot camp aglow on their faces as I accepted their *Gilgamesh* assignments and mentioned that they've survived the worst of the course. I laid down the terms of the class once again, for emphasis: this is about interpretation, translations, and finding new text in the margins of the canon. Catullus was an obvious point for that, and the absolute litmus test for their ability to go on this joyride will be their reactions to Thursday's reading, Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, a wholly postmodern retelling of *The Odyssey* from the point-of-view of long-suffering wife, Penelope. If they can roll with the punches of reading Atwood's unapologetically funny and feminist text and then follow the staid Homeric version, they will certainly be attuned to the ideas I'm promulgating by semester's end (but hopefully questioning the ideas while they are digesting them). While I am looking for organic outgrowths of gender and sexuality in my students' reactions in each course, I cannot deny my pedagogic place. I picked these texts. Particularly in my classics course, I structured the class to question the very nature of what classical is and what is canonical. I am stacking the deck in this course to get answers—which answers remain to be seen, but preferably authentic and unforced. I am absolutely committed to a nondemagogic teaching stance. Now to keep to that...

In the “not good class experience” category would go my English 101 composition class today. Misbehaving, late, not listening to directions: they had kindergarten stamped on their collective foreheads. During the Barbie sequence that we were completing from last class, I interrupted to ask whether they would prefer a course that had less discussion and more quizzes on comma splices. That seemed temporarily to shut them up—but once I had broken my levee, I overflowed. I spent five minutes berating them for acting like children, for being surly. Melanie pointed out that she was having a bad day “because of yesterday” (September 11).

Wow. Talk about shaking my cobwebs and doldrums off. Though the five-year anniversary of the September 11 events had made small impact yesterday, I was thinking far more about my mother and her upcoming anniversary. My mother married my stepfather on September 15, 2001. I was stranded in California while the transportation system was silent, and I missed my opportunity to walk my mother down the aisle. Imagining myself doing so has been the preoccupying projection of my day, of yesterday, and probably all week. I forget that maybe somebody else had reactions of her own...

Then I balanced that experience against my prior two classes, which had no need to behave so churlishly. They were not freshmen, though. These college freshmen still needed me to establish that my classroom, no matter how much mirth might develop, was a serious place of study. And so, we moved directly into a new group activity, relating to Naomi Wolf’s *Rites of Sisterhood*. Responding to her five messages (our word of the day) to women, each group needed to craft a paragraph that argued that theirs was the

most important. As luck would have it, the slacker group near the window, with Message 1 (“cherish a new definition of what it means to be a woman”), chose not to write a paragraph, since they felt it was “unnecessary.” Linda, my classroom barometer, looked intently at me as if my response would dictate the entire balance of the universe. Well, I suspect she was curious as to whether I was going to snap, since I had already had an outburst. These gentlemen, with one lady, on the side had been ruminating about their children and the Giants throughout their allotted time. I wasn’t going to tolerate their continued assault on my class, particularly when I was without my glasses and quite literally feeling blind. Did I throw them out? No. I informed them that since they did not write, they would not speak either, since the discussion was reserved for those who’d done the assignment. The conversation was not quite as lively as I’d hoped—having to argue for a position you didn’t necessarily agree with didn’t germinate well, as people began defecting (particularly to Group 5’s “Endow yourself with the ability to write”) to other sides. I summed up by pointing out that it wasn’t about what you believed, but how you crafted your arguments, and pointed out that so many of their anemic papers were guilty of overindulgent emotional outbursts without courtesy of thesis, argument, proof, or conclusion. Some lightbulbs turned on above a few heads anyhow. The fact that three students showed up today for the first time didn’t make things any better—they kept interrupting group work and free-writing to ask basic questions (“What does the text look like?” “What are we reading?” “How does this work?”) best answered two weeks ago. I have little patience right now, which I can’t tell if it’s because I need sleep, because I need less lazy students, or because I need my mother, after all.

In thinking about what I'll be doing on Thursday, I need to consider my sanity. I need to consider the ways my grief enters the classroom, and whether my reactions are appropriate. I need to consider the needs of my students, whether it be September 11 issues or surly freshmen behavior. I need to exhale and lead.

Comment

Gerald Graff has noted that student writers often reach the university level with a lack of worldview, which doubles as inwardly focused point-of-views often reaching out for “answers” from a demagogic professor. Karen Fitts has suggested ways that point-of-views can be developed using small group pedagogy (which Estelle Freedman has detailed) and Peter Elbow's philosophies of class management. Fitts also encourages pairing these ideas with the writing process so that the development of personal worldview is tethered to development as a writer at the university level.

Both Deborah Britzman and the Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter have detailed the ways in which students suffer from PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) after localized tragedy (Columbine or 9/11, for instance). Although I am dubious about the way in which the anniversary of 9/11 was brought up to subtract time from discussing the reading, it is nonetheless significant to recognize the validity of the PTSD symptoms, and to allow for any students who want to express their conflicting feelings from outside the formal curriculum (which I encouraged through writing).

It is also intriguing that I am aware of my pedagogic place (without denial) when I take pride in the achievement of my class by noting that I chose the texts. I am charged with

educating these students—no matter how nondemogogically I do so. Fear of an interpellative state is not synonymous with having no perspective, or no skill in steering students toward better choices of discourse.

September 14, 2006 11:01 am

Lecturing on Dante this morning, admitting to my class that I can't stand Dante, I questioned Catholic firmament on faith and devotion, dogmatic slavery to Aquinas and Dante's rules and regulations, and discovered a bit of passion in myself doing it. One student, Gregory, came up after class to question my sincerity in disliking Dante so much. I told him I thought Dante was dangerous, because he seduces with his rules and insistence that only smart people (like him) descend from Aristotle, and so you must adhere or be marked as a heretic or a dumb-dumb. He seemed to like that. I suspect he is a bit firm in his Christian beliefs (speculation) but intrigued to see things from a fresh perspective. If I am right, it does me good. They challenged me quite a bit on Dante, which chastened me. Purgatory: where I will go if it exists because my parents annulled their marriage. Which circle of hell do I go to for being a homosexual? How about mental defection—is that still an early circle of hell? Thinking about Dante makes my blood boil. I hope that came across in my lecture. Passion is okay in the classroom.

Comment

I realize there are others who've written persuasively about the queer erotic content in Dante (William Burgwinkle's "The Form of our Desire" particularly locates these

possibilities), but I am personally blocked. Working through Dante (working through my own purgatories) will be a long-term quest for me, academically and personally.

Gregory Bredback has written about the potential for queer anal/ysis of pedagogical reproduction, commenting on Jane Gallop's penetration analogy, among other treatments of subject reception and transmission. Bredback argues that pedagogy, what he terms "ped(erast)agogy," is a process that perpetually reinscribes heteronormativity within the classroom. I am dubious about this reification of the queer body as receptacle of seduction waiting to pounce on impressionable students. I am obviously aware of the need for restrained pedagogy—indeed, my constant comments on hegemony and interpellation would border on paranoid reading if there weren't a need to be so aware of our power dynamics, and the need to empower our students. William Pinar has written, in "Curriculum as Gender Text," about the Freudian ways in which our curriculum is sexual (a section is titled, "From behind we are all women") and marked by desire. I am uncomfortable with these notions, especially in a 21st century academic marketplace where you must keep your door open when talking to students and sexual harassment policies require binder clips. If queer pedagogy represents a disruption to power, then shouldn't it also disrupt such gender binaries as Pinar references? My behind is neither female nor relevant in the classroom.

The queer body as a space under hegemonic rule is hardly a new conceit; Brian Pronger's 1990 *The Arena of Masculinity* details the ways the gay male body is ruled by hegemonic pursuits (obsession with athletic bodies and concomitant masculinity, or defiant rebellion

against implicit masculinity, marking both pursuits as queer and hegemonized). David Halperin has famously called for the “decentralization and regionalization of all pleasures” in his plea for queer exercise of power (by eschewing the closet), *Saint=Foucault*. Analyzing Sedgwick, he correctly notes that the “closet is nothing if not the product of complex relations of power” (29), and moving into queer bodies in S/M realms, he recognizes the ways in which any marginalization or closeting of sexuality, identity, or pleasure can lead to a hegemonized subjectivity. Sex-positivity is a key to healthy resistance to hegemony (as Abramson & Pinkerton have documented in their collection of essays, *With Pleasure*), but full disclosure as a “queer” faculty member comes with simultaneous risk and rewards: while some writers (particular those in the 1994 essay collection *Tilting the Tower*) document the healthy genera for their students (particularly ones with queer sexualities), Joseph Litvak (among others) has cautioned about the romance and excitement of the queer body in the classroom, and the ways that can distract from the pedagogical aims of a classroom (such as dissemination of a personal pedagogy and the consumption of a text) by creating the professor’s body as a spectacle/text. And Leo Bersani, considering the double binds of Proust and queer sexuality, has noted that “exposure involves a double humiliation: it is at once a confession of rebuffed desire and a narrative of the impressively base rules by which the rebuffed lover seeks to exercise power over those indifferent to his desires” (107). Bersani’s analysis reminds us that queer sexuality and queer bodies have always been linked, and that we must consider that in any deployment of queer pedagogy—the pedagogical does not mitigate the historical uses of the queer. Amy Winans urges us to remember that queer pedagogy should worry about knowledge creation and parameters of

questioning; queer pedagogy need not disrupt the classroom by creating hysterical reactions to the queer body (or subjectivity or presence or corpus, or however we choose to see ourselves in the classroom). Fuller consideration of the queer subject in the classroom will be made in future comments.

September 14, 2006 2:25pm

I am mid-class, teaching Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*. I say teaching with a forked tongue, since we are spending the class not discussing tropes or examining the poetic images of Atwood's rendering of *The Odyssey* through the eyes of Penelope, but rather we are outlining the entire half of the text we have read. I'm hoping they will see the parallel beauty of plot and structure in a modern text along with Homer's epic when we begin that next week, since no doubt many of my little classics troupers will be consulting Sparksnotes.com and their ilk. We'll see. They are chatting, getting to know one another: behaving in ways outside the expectations of a Great Books room. By the time we finish with Atwood, this experience may yet be proof my approach can work, or, demonstrate potential for utter failure. It is all on the students; I have done what I can. And as I look out at them, chatting, smiling, but still a bit befuddled, I can only hope I can guide them through Scylla and Charybdis.

September 14, 2006 3:25pm

I've just had a confrontation with Corinna, who believed that cutting and pasting three pages on Gilgamesh did not constitute plagiarism. I plan to use this example in my

composition class as a reminder not to commit the act, but I am also filled with anger. Corinna passed in an assignment on *Gilgamesh* with one opening line introducing the piece as reminding her of “Joan of Arc.” That detail made me chortle my Diet Peach Snapple, thinking I had an idiot on my hands. The rest of her three pages of material was directly cut-and-paste from Houghton Mifflin’s website, replete with unturned quotation marks and words like “indefatigable.” She’s not an idiot; she’s a larcenist. At a school for Criminal Justice? And she thinks she did nothing wrong... I am turning into my mother with the judgments and recriminations...

Comment

There is a short version to my feelings on plagiarism: when a student includes an uncited sentence or so from a source (particularly the easy candy store that the Internet has become), I’ll fail the paper and try to motivate them to “still pass the course.” If it’s a case of a poor but intended citation, I’ll pull the student aside to explain the process (yet again) and explain that the work is unacceptable until the citation is fixed. Hearing that they haven’t failed tends to relieve a student who has probably been in great consternation over the process. I always make the distinction between intentional and unintentional plagiarism (the cut-and-paste variety of cheating versus sloppy note-taking, poor citing, or overreliance on paraphrasing). It’s not enough to tell students that plagiarism is unacceptable or ask them to “read the syllabus.” We must also take time to explain the intellectual arguments behind disallowing plagiarism, and develop trust that good-faith efforts will not be failed (and conversely, underscore the draconian penalties for bad-faith efforts to cheat). I was fortunate to have a strong Chair at John Jay who

backed professors in their judgment on plagiarism, provided that the penalties were clearly stated in the syllabus. I have boldfaced in my syllabus: **if you commit plagiarism in this class, you will fail.** A strong syllabus is your first line of defense against the “I didn’t know it was wrong” argument. A strong assignment will also discourage plagiarism: response papers to esoteric readings, emphasizing strong personal perspective, will dissuade plagiarism by default (they won’t find any sources on the Internet to copy). Specific paper assignments about issues in the readings will also take away the itch to buy a paper from an online service recycling trite banalities about the “great works.” I’ve yet to have a student challenge my final ruling on failing the class (though plenty have tried to circumvent the truth, as we’ll see in a future journal entry), but following a strong syllabus with strong assignments is a protection for that moment when a student does take it to a higher authority.

On a tangential note, the poet Kenneth Goldsmith has taught a class at the University of Pennsylvania on “Uncreative Writing” in which students are penalized for showing originality, and are encouraged to plagiarize. It’s a remarkable rhetorical exercise, but one that might be lost on my current students, who seem not to grasp the importance of personal authenticity but rather the ramifications of committing an academic crime.

September 14, 2006 3:41pm

I am taking a few moments during free-writing to free write myself. Today’s topic is “men.” Men are exasperating, irresistible, consumed with power, dangerous in groups, generally bossy, frustrating, maddening, and irreplaceable. Of course so are most

women, but let's see my students make that distinction. I am having them make lists of positive and negative attributes of men—broken down into two groups of men, and two groups of women, each with a positive and negative list. I have no plan on where this is going, but I am curious to see how it plays out. I am also eager to end this class, since my brother, Frank, is visiting for the day before he heads back to England, and it seems that, without Mom to complain about, we need each other a bit more than before. My youngest brother, Tom, just called between classes to talk about nothing. We have to make time for our mourning, even though it seems to be silences signifying fury, unlike the traditional argumentative brawls about nothing. We listen to each other's silences, which I'll need after leading this boisterous session.

September 14, 2006 5:45pm

Well, it was as predicted a boisterous class, with me often losing control of the proceedings to gender-based disagreements about cheating men and crazy women. After their free-writing, the students were grouped by gender, and then split, making four groups, two of men, two of women. Each group was given a topic: one male and one female, to list positive qualities of men, and the other two, to list negative qualities of men. Once assembled, the comments from these groups were placed on the board on x- and y- axes, with negative comments below the median line, and male comments on the left, female comments on the right. The board reflected panoply of their opinions, reflecting a lack of difference (“aggressive” appeared on all four lists, for instance) based around their gender or assignment. It also reflected their general incapacity when I challenged them to define words on the board that couldn't be applied to women. The

upshot was on being specific, and avoiding generalizing as we head now into writing proposals and first drafts of research papers. These students will not be successful unless they have passion for their topic, and specificity in their proof. I gave them this sermon at the end of class, and it seems many light bulbs went on (certainly Linda and Gerry's did, so those barometers were showing positive weather).

One oddity that occurred was when Marius, a husky student of international descent and pronounced accent, took a cell-phone call during class. I interrupted the group who was speaking at the time to demand he terminate the call, which he did not do right away. Later in the class, while one group added "sex" to the board, someone else shouted "What kind of sex?" and Marius said _____. I do not know, but whatever he said was potentially controversial or targeted at me, because it quieted the class into the murmurs and giggles of children waiting to see someone else get into trouble. As I didn't hear it, I shrugged at the class and moved forward. Still, I do not know what to do about this student. He seems uninterested—doesn't appear to be doing any work—and has been part of the disruptive force on the window side of the room. I spoke with him outside the class, and he was respectful and apologetic, so I am particularly baffled. Perhaps it's a group dynamic thing?

September 14, 2006 9:45pm

Today was also fascinating for my interactions with fellow adjuncts. Last year I shared a small office, which was often empty when I was there, so in addition to getting lots of work done, I got lots of privacy. What I lost was interaction and exchange of ideas with

my peers. This morning, as one officemate arrived, another peer that we were both unfamiliar with was sitting at the first's customary desk on the far wall. He and I pantomimed questions of "Who is that guy?" but since he was with a student, we were not free to ask his identity. The student seemed a classic case: missed three of the first four classes, including a test, and wanted to come make things up. The professor kept telling him that this wasn't high school, and that in his experience, he would likely not get caught up, nor would he attend enough remaining classes to pass. The student nodded with assent as if at a revival tent, not realizing he was being told he would likely fail.

After the taciturn student left, the nameless professor introduced himself. A three-way conversation emerged, in which we discussed the high-school mentality of so many of our students. The new guy opined that many of his students still felt the burden was on us (the professors) to pass them, to give them their work, to accept their makeup work, their feeble excuses, and to exempt them when their excuses were significant. I had a student last year who had a house fire. I was extremely sympathetic, and offered to let her do her work on her own timetable; however, she was already behind, and her house fire wasn't going to excuse her from doing her work, which is what she asked for. She was less than thrilled with me, and I felt great sympathy for her life drama, but in the end my job is to educate and evaluate the class, not to enrich their lives. She didn't do a chunk of her work, and her D- was frankly a gift. I didn't do her any favors, though—realistically, she should have withdrawn and taken the course again when her life was stable.

We seemed to be preaching to each other's choir, which I suspect is part and parcel of all conversations among adjuncts. Not enough space, resources, time, support, plenty of problems, and in all of that, a sense of patchwork community.

After discovery of my students' plagiarism, I had a discussion with another adjunct, who expressed low optimism about the skills of our students. She told me I was brave even to confront them, and braver still to try and give at least one A (however curved) per assignment. She evidently gave not one A last semester. Not one! And I thought I was too harsh! This semester will be a challenge, as I can sense that I will not be assigning many As in composition; will my need for harmony and validation alter this? I can say with Dudley-Do-Right sincerity that it will not, for I am a valid, vital member of the academy, with virtues and skills galore. Yet, I am still as human as Dante's scattered souls amid the circles of hell, souls screaming out for salvation from their eternal tortures. I am trying to balance my needs and my bad days with responsibility to my students, and I think I am doing so successfully, but this semester is still very young.

September 15, 2006 4:12pm

I am not teaching today, which is a relief since it is my mother's fifth anniversary with her second husband, Jim. He's not having a good day, despite the flowers I sent. I had not been having a good day, but it got worse.

I received an email from the chair of my department detailing a conversation he had had with Corinna, the *Gilgamesh* plagiarist. She asked to transfer sections, looking to avoid my F, and tried to pass off her work as undocumented paraphrasing. My chair expressed misgivings about me informing a student in the third week that s/he'd failed for the semester. He also expressed that he felt her work wasn't worthy of an F. I was a bit crazed at that point, writing a lengthy response that overreacted to his note. Excerpts:

What Corinna perhaps failed to show you was that she cut and pasted that entire paraphrased summary from Houghton Mifflin's website--word for word (save for her clumsy opening sentence, and changing an occasional comma/plural to make it difficult to find via Google). I gave her a copy of that attached to her paper, but I am guessing she did not show that to you. Had she made an error in paraphrasing, and not committed a major act of cheating, she wouldn't have failed.

I also told her that she has every right to continue attendance, but per my policy, any act of plagiarism constitutes failing the course. Hers was not even close to the line of making an error in judgment (an error in paraphrasing would certainly not provoke me to fail someone--a cut-and-paste job does). She was advised to drop, but also told that she was welcome to continue. Obviously, I wish the school policy would change on that, but I certainly am adhering to it with regards to allowing failing, disruptive, and cheating students to continue attending class.

I realize you didn't have all this information when she spoke to you. Given her obvious and flagrant cheating, I certainly did not expect her to escalate to you, considering how wildly egregious her transgression was. I taught immediately after that class, and did not drop you an email to document the encounter. I regret that now.

I suspect her request to transfer (and "hesitance to involve you") was to avoid involving me--which would expose the way she lied to you, which only adds to her shocking behavior (I suspect Corinna left off that she raised her voice to me in front of three of her classmates that I had no right to "fail her," even as she acknowledged that she cut-and-pasted--I've no doubt those students would be compelled to discuss that with you if asked). I can't imagine any appeals board overturning her failure given the information I've just added.

I advised Corinna that per the policy of the course, she would fail at the end of the semester. There's really no other way to sugarcoat it, particularly to someone who is a cheater, and now a liar. Considering the way she's behaved to both me and you here, her eventual failing (or timely drop) seems to me a mild penalty.

The course packet I distributed was reviewed for 45 minutes at the first class session. While an imposing collection, it beats distributing the information piecemeal throughout the semester. After review, each student is asked to sign a contract that acknowledges they've carefully reviewed all the syllabus information--up to and including the

plagiarism policy. Corinna signed that. Moreover, I suspect the half-truths she's offered you would violate any honor code our school could have.

Upon speaking to my chair, I discovered that she had left him the copy of her plagiarized website, but she'd implied it was the text of the work (in a sense it was—the same translation we used, but excerpted on this website). I felt very unsatisfied with my conversation with him—he expressed concerns that we not fail people in the first weeks of the semester, but I still contend that we don't fail students: they fail themselves. Plagiarism is disrespectful and the highest academic crime at this level. That it was caught so early did them an undeserved favor by letting them drop the class without recrimination. I am still feeling so unsettled and upset by this episode. I'm very much ready to explode, and it's making the rest of my day miserable.

Comment

The school policy is rather forceful that a syllabus is a contract, and so the composition of the syllabus becomes significant in vouchsafing the protections afforded professors against such moments. On top of a lengthy review of the syllabus (which spells out the option to fail for any documentation of plagiarism), I require each student to sign a contract with me after they've read the syllabus, acknowledging receipt and reading of the syllabus. I even excerpt salient sections of the syllabus in the contract (such as the plagiarism and attendance policies) to prevent the "I didn't know the rules" arguments that inevitably pop up.

September 19, 2006 4:17pm

It's been a frustrating day as a teacher. My morning was spent giving a lecture on Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, which it was clear no one read, save eager participators like Jacob, Gregory, and Leonora, who seemed really interested in reading more, and were visibly frustrated by the slow lecture, and the pedantic questions by some participants. After a class that left me more tired than I was when I arose at 6:30 this morning, Jacob came to request that my lectures be more substantive, or that we move to more interactive classes. What could I say? I agree! I felt horrible to see a good student being held back by the majority's lack of work ethic. It was a class best left in the "needs retooling" bin.

Group work on *The Odyssey* proved relatively uneventful. Corinna arrived early to let me know that the department chair "had let her back in." I let her know that while she is certainly welcome, the chair would like to see her after class. Her bright, victorious visage dissipated on that—but that story goes on, still, as Chris was unavailable to see her this afternoon. She made herself invaluable to her group, too, perhaps trying to make it more difficult for me to fail her. The foolishness of youth! Two groups were concerned with using the behavior of Penelope's suitors to guess parallel behaviors among Odysseus' men in the next books (we read 1-8 for today, 9-16 for Thursday). One group was concerned with documenting the events of these 8 books for our class plot digest. And the last two groups were concerned with analyzing the Nausicaa encounter in Book 6 for storytelling and perspective concerns.

So am I imposing the limits on them, or are they seeing these alternative currents for themselves? Group 3's leader, Nancy, was adamant about arguing a sexual relationship between Nausicaa and Odysseus, as well as seeing the Cyclops as differently abled. I reiterated that their job as a group was to document the events, but is she trying to impress me by seeing different valences? I'm starting to feel like the sex ogre, spreading sexual difference across the classics and Middle Ages, and not taking no for an answer.

I am writing from my podium in composition, where the students are doing a peer review with quiz value on each other's proposals. "Propose" was the word of the day—and the punishment inflicted on those who did not do their proposals (they must propose to me how they are going to make up the zeroes, make up the work, make up their disrespect for the class). The six in question—predictably Cara, Marius, Jack, Carter, Martika, and Tommy—were surly, disregarding my admonitions that they be silent through the punitive assignment. I hate being a disciplinarian. I hate these rules I have to enforce. And most of all, I can't stand those who spite me for going as gentle as I can with the rod. It's going to be hard for these six to jump off my shit list. Or to get caught up.

September 21, 2006 10:41am

I have been depressed and have no desire to teach right now. I have the non-drunken equivalent of a hangover—my brain feels gin-soaked, my throat dry-heaved, my head tender to the touch, my eyes sensitive to light. I somehow got through a morning seminar on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* that transcended its original intent. I found the Norton Anthology's lecture on the text, full of outdated and outmoded notions on how to

read the text as chivalric and heroic, with scant attention to the meaty sexual and gendered subplots. Sadly, it seems much of my class did not do the assigned reading, but I nonetheless gave quite a performance. Dispassionate but reverent as I could be, I read the lecture—word for word, stopping for emphasis on some of the less controversial points (pentagrams, plot points, antecedents in Irish lit). After twenty minutes of this, I asked what seemed wrong with my talk? Gregory, the voice of logic and reason in the room, responded that I didn't seem to believe my own words, and that it seemed like someone else's ideas. Bingo, Gregory! He takes the teeth-pulling out of this class. I then proceeded to discuss the schisms in medieval studies—classical, traditional, rigid versus modern, freethinking, interested in gender and sexuality. I introduced Richard Zeikowitz's use of triangular desire in analyzing the work—picking up on René Girard and Sedgwick. I asked for the class to offer their own versions of triangles in the texts—with answers as widespread as Gawain/Bercilak/Bercilak's wife to the Holy Trinity itself, with sexual and religious intersections in between up for discussion. There was definitely a freeing around the room—fewer pens and noses to paper, more feedback, more guessing, more excitement. Gregory didn't look too keen—he kept leaping to the defense of Gawain as morally pure and chivalric. He looked positively ashen to think of him being feminized by the sexual triangle with the Bercilaks, or the associations of green lace. And yet, despite my hideous non-hangover, it was a good class—filled with happy students thinking about old texts in new ways. How they fare on the quiz next week will excite or depress me further, but they are giving me some optimism as I move toward a deserved weekend of sleep.

Comment

Richard Zeikowitz has written persuasively about queer pedagogy in the medieval classroom as not only about sexual identity but also about disrupting the normal. His identification of triangular desire, following René Girard and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, is one I've replicated and articulated when I teach *Gawain*—not only because I see it as an authentic argument, but because it offers my students a structured opportunity to see sound reasoning that implicates the normal—and potentially, their own heteronormativities. The shifting gender and sexual identities in this text are transtemporal, and the exciting conversations that emerged from this class vindicate this approach—still nondemagogic, but invested in demonstrating the elastic capacity of the academy to question conventional wisdom and heteronormativity.

September 26, 2006 2:20pm

Illness strikes even the most earnest journalist, and I am no exception. I was felled by a migraine on Thursday afternoon. I spent the better part of each class covering my eyes, praying for the strength to get home, to get to bed. I had assigned group work for my classics class on *The Odyssey*, with an emphasis on gender issues: Penelope's behavior, the interactions with Nausicaa, explicating the role of the (innocent? treacherous?) maids. While I did my best to circulate, I largely stood at my podium, hands over my eyes, hiding from the light. Occasionally a student would ask how I was doing—Arnold made a funny, smart remark that my eyes couldn't take the strain of looking at their papers. Amalia asked if I wanted one of her Advils. Tamia and Wilbur subtly urged me to just cancel class and go home. I did end up ending the session fifteen minutes early, explaining the severity of my migraine. My hope was to rest my eyes in my office, and

dig out enough to survive the library field trip I had planned with my composition students. I also warned that I hoped everyone was reading.

My next class was spent at the John Jay Library, showing my freshmen how to access the wonderful worlds of EBSCO, CUNY+, and reference librarians who were granted them by dint of their tuition remission. Sadly, I suspect more of my students were more concerned with checking their MySpace accounts on the abundant computer terminals than in researching their papers, but I can't coax them to maximize their use of our wonderful resources. Hoping to rest at the quiet, non-fluorescent library, though, was a miscalculation. As should have been predictable, the students whose proposals had not been approved—as well as the six who didn't submit one on time—were monopolizing my time, expecting immediate and fervent feedback that their revised work was acceptable. As one would present his work, another would interrupt. Meanwhile, students actually interested in my feedback on their research (those with approved topics, that is) had to wait in a queue snaking around the microfiches, trying to get my attention. There would be no rest for my weary head.

Martika wanted immediate feedback on her work—despite being two days late with it. Gerry didn't understand how his work could be “good” and not be approved. Dylan sat in front of me and stared—intently—while I evaluated proposals. Naturally, his was not approved—written with what appeared to be a breakneck pace, riddled with typos, and wishing to write on “Why men cheat?” That he was the fourth student to attempt this topic and the fourth to not offer one whit of research or resource to back up how he'd

prove such a lofty thesis didn't incline me to approve his work any more than I had declined the prior three. Students like Marybeth and Linda, so full of inquiry and passion in class, stood around, trying to get my attention for reasons I'll never know, finally slinking away to unknown parts of the library while the dozen slacking student monopolized my table.

Getting out of the building even proved traumatic. I was on the verge of tears when, while leaving the T building, Tommy, who was not with our field trip, intercepted me at the library entrance, with his proposal, which he "wanted my approval on" so he could go.

I looked at the hastily conceived document—I couldn't tell you what he proposed anymore—and told him that it looked vague and undocumented with resources.

"Huh?"

"You need to show me some research."

"Huh?"

"Come to class, Tommy, and I can spend more time with you. I am leaving now—I'd suggest you revise this."

"Um..."

The intense pain of my migraine finally overwhelmed me to the point that I appeared to be sobbing with the ferocity of a mourning son rather than a migraine-ravaged professor. It's hardly as if either was untrue.

I spent two days in agony, trying to sleep it off, debating whether this drilling sensation behind my right eye constituted an emergency room visit. I stubbornly refused to go there, and have since scheduled an appointment with a new doctor for next week, with the hopes of discovering that nothing is wrong but a bit of stress from a long September.

September 26, 2006 6:40pm

It has been another fun day of shaping young minds while feeling baffled by student lethargy. My day started with a bang—giving a quiz on *Sir Gawain* that largely tested paying attention to my prior lecture (the short answer and “put the events in order” sections were all covered verbatim in lecture, and the essay question on elements of shame that can be perceived in the work was discussed post-lecture on Thursday). That the grading has been mixed shouldn't surprise—it did seem to follow along the lines of who read or who pays attention in lecture, with some people grasping at the “restate the question as your answer” straw that doesn't quite work. I was once a student—I remember that trick of essay padding. It was also clear which students knew their material by the speed of completion. Gregory and Gina were both finished within twenty minutes. The 35 minutes I gave for the quiz were used—right up to the “pens down!” comment—by a large plurality of the class. The second part of class consisted of a discussion of quotes I assembled by academics in the last twenty years on the text—

which provoked some discussion on how to consider the work. Is it a cause célèbre for feminists and queers, or a high text for Christianity and courtly love, chivalry and good morals? I used lecture notes found on the web from a professor in England, who refers to Sheila Fisher's work and uses it as foundation for arguing the text's elevation of strong female characters only to repudiate and crush them by the end, restoring Christian order. It was a good series of chalk strokes on the board, and while pens were moving taking down the words, only Gregory, Cassandra, and Evie responded or spoke, making it more a lecture and less a conversation. It's discouraging.

After class, Gregory asked me if "when I was in school, people actually thought in class." How do you respond to that? I danced around it, offering platitudes about different school environments, the vagaries of lecture classes, etc., but it's hard not to feel for a student so clearly feeling limited by the apathy and incapacities of those around him. Gregory followed me to my office, and regaled me with stories that "I might appreciate" regarding his intersections with the medieval—reading *Beowulf* in high school, having an uncle in San Francisco with a taste for antiques. He told me an anecdote about a well-meaning cousin who destroyed said uncle's centuries-old chairs by having them reupholstered. This student was charming and really concerned that I see *him*—and, I think, see him as better than his classmates, which is a tricky one, since his in-class performance *is* head-and-shoulders above the bulk of his classmates, but his attitude definitely seems to imply that he is above it.

I can relate to those halcyon days of thinking I knew better than everyone (teachers/professors most of all), but I fear my middle-of-the-road approach to Gregory (let him tell the stories, and enjoy them but not elevate him to a peer—maintaining the professional distance) is not going to elicit his best performance. I had a similar situation as a sophomore at Penn, when I was already an English major but belatedly fulfilling a freshman writing requirement by taking a course on Shakespeare and film. The class was painfully “below” me—with plenty of non-majors and green freshmen alike baffled that Hamlet wasn’t just a Mel Gibson film. Instead of substantive class discussion, we had plot-driven quizzes. It was torturous. I complained to the professor—like me now, a graduate student. I felt “above” my peers, and definitely made an effort to feel kinship—to create a private bond—with the professor, to the point of flagging him down in the English Department hallways to “just chat.” I began a pattern of spotty attendance—I suspect my attendance rate was close to 60%—and began coming to class drunk (not belligerently so, but nonetheless imbibing alcohol at midday).

I can sense Gregory slipping away—probably quite bored and above us, even as he potentially spirals by those he seems to resent. It wouldn’t surprise me if he starts to skip class. It would surprise me if he liquors up for an 8:15am class, but should anything shock me since I’ve been teaching, it wouldn’t be a drunken student.

In my classics section, I gave a lengthy quiz on *The Odyssey*, the epic they have been addressing for two prior class sections, done extensive group work on, and wrote notes in class on the plotting. I distributed a handout with just their group work assignments—as

submitted, which two groups chose not to do—and allowed them to use the handouts on the quiz, but no open book or notes. Predictably, the results were not good. Lots of complaining and kvetching about essays (in a writing-enhanced section) afterwards, to the point where I was ready to block my ears to the din of the whines. The grading was across the board, but largely 50s-70s, with those grades mainly due to double-speak essay answers that got partial credit for sounding a bit above brain-dead, but ultimately, this disheartens me. This class is ebullient—full of promise and energy in the classroom, but they evidently are not reading or are not relating the text. I suspect they are relating to me (or at least doing what I want to see/hear), which is why in-class has been perky, participatory, and friendly. It is not coincidental that I pretty much know their names already—even in a class of 30. They have a collective, but they are also a collection of individual personalities—but now I need to figure out a way to tap into it academically.

My composition class went surprisingly well. First, there were many absences—9 of 29 did not appear. The smaller class had a more intimate feeling, and the absences cut across all segments of the room's geography, so people were forced during group work to interact with others they may not have known before. Their assigned topic for free-writing was "Biology" and during our discussion "nature" and "nurture," the terms I was planning to use for our group assignment, emerged as topics. The reading, "The Gender Blur," by Deborah Blum, addresses scientific approaches to understanding the composition of gender, and so this assignment was also to understand how we gender composition, as well as perceive nature and nurture. The four groups had to declare whether nature or nurture was responsible for the development of each of the following

peerages: “Men who cook”; “Women presidents (of companies or countries)”; “Boys who play with Barbie dolls” (a nod to prior class discussions of Ken’s other half); and “Girls who play soccer” (a reference to the Blum text discussing a longitudinal study of testosterone levels in girls who play soccer).

The dynamics that emerged were more divided than usual. Martika, the only female in the “Women presidents” group, was openly chafed and grew angry with the four men in her group for stifling her perspective (their perspective, perhaps intentionally inflammatory for Martika’s sake, was that it’s unnatural for women to be in charge, so therefore it must be a nurtured action. Antwan seems to take glee in using his gifted brain to think of devilish arguments!). Gerry, the only male in the “Men who cook” group, dominated his group’s discussion time, asserting that since the days of “hunter/gatherers,” it has been the woman’s job to cook, so therefore men who cook are nurtured. His own group—with strong personalities like Aliah, Erma, and Melanie, along with the animated and talented writer Marybeth—seemed to openly be in disagreement—lips pursed as if to speak in protest, arms crossed, legs fidgety, all in seeming protest. Yet, Gerry dominated his group’s time, despite the normally lively group he was in. The all-female group working on “Boys who play with Barbie dolls” came up with lively responses—also a vote for nurture, because the “natural” inclination is to be aggressive for men, which is why they generally play with tanks and trucks. They also suggested, provocatively, that even boys who play with dolls would be more likely to be destructive with them—a point that got lost in the crowd still shrieking over the hunter/gatherer hubbub. Linda was surprisingly quiet—her early zest seems to have shrunken through

absences and missed assignments. Lindsey and Marnie emerged from that group with strong perspectives—interestingly, Janie was very active in discussion in their preparation time, but downright moribund during their discussion time with the class. The final group, on “Girls who play soccer,” helped me tie up some points on nature and nurture as well as provide the most balanced group—two women and three men. In this one group, Poitra and Lana—both rather strong, emerging personalities in the last few classes—dominated the gentlemen, providing robust argument that playing soccer must be nurtured because “someone must buy the balls” for the youth—male or female.

Where I sandbagged them—and implicitly the class—was with this phrase: “I was born to _____.” Play with Barbie. Play soccer. Cook. Where does an innate, essential calling fit into their uniform perception of “nurture” making the world spin? My class ended not with one term winning, but rather with me asking my students to consider what it means to feel something is born to you—qualities you believe yourself to be *essentially*—versus the traits that you feel are *constructed* through your parents, your schools, your peers, etc., with the proviso that some of those qualities may overlap—certainly a “gay identity” can be considered to be both something you are born with and something you develop over time. I suspect many of the qualities we hold as immutable are indeed in constant flux.

This should have left my class on a high note, but I had to go and make composition rear its vibrant head. Before dismissing the class, I asked students to bring their response papers to me for grading—this is the sixth response paper of the semester, but only the

second I have graded (they will ultimately have five of fifteen “graded”—mainly to prevent people from not doing the work in the portfolio system until the end of the term—and the other ten reviewed in their portfolio at term’s end). Multiple students said, “What paper?” as if I had zapped them with a stun gun. Martika, clearly full of zest after her contentious group session, brought her paper to me first, and announced to her classmates, “It’s in the syllabus. We’re *supposed* to be doing these for every reading, you know.” She said it better than I could.

Four papers. Four. None of them were of any good quality, either. Antwan’s was too long and too florid—he thinks he needs to prove to me how smart he is with grandiosity rather than a direct argument. Carter is really limited in his skills, but I am going to try and refer him to the Writing Center, and see about improving his sentence construction with them while I work on his logic and arguments. Erma—who did not turn in the first paper—clearly did not understand the format, turning in a breathlessly dizzy book-report-style diatribe with no paragraphs, no argument, and no response, but plenty of regurgitation.

Martika, proud that she did the assignment, started with an assertion about the complexity of the human body, then immediately went into recounting Blum’s work, book report detail by book report detail. That she tried to tie it up with a non sequitur regarding Tonka trucks, dolls, and gender roles that related to the text and attempted closure shows me that she is trying—she attempted an opening, and attempted a closing, albeit neither on the same topic. If I can get her fired up in her writing the same way her group fired

her up—on point, focused, engaged—then I suspect she has the promise to go further. Sadly, I worry that she will end up lost, too—she sits over in the section with the students (Cara, Marius, Jack, Carter, and Tommy) who seem to feed each other’s slacking. Today all of them (save Carter) were absent, which meant Martika engaged new people, and blossomed before my eyes. Now I need to either move her away from them (providing they are still showing up) or use her as a catalyst to improve their performances—in-class and out.

Speaking of the absent Tommy, for the second consecutive class session, he did not come to class, but showed as it was ending so that I could evaluate a hastily thrown-together proposal. This one, on—you guessed it—“Why men cheat?” Did they have a potluck and decide on a collective theme? I collected the late work. If he shows up on Thursday, he’ll still be over a week behind his classmates with submitted, approved, and researched proposals. The first draft is due in nine days. I am not sure if I am looking forward to it, or appalled by the prospect of it.

September 28, 2006 11:58am

I usually do not fret over small things like evaluations or assessments. I *am* concerned about being watched this semester. I do not know the professor who is evaluating me. I am teaching *The Penelopiad*, a 21st century work, in a classics class. If he is a traditional scholar, I may be hosed. I have indigestive maladies, could barely sleep, and don’t feel prepared. On top of this, two of my officemates just got into a brawl over cell phone etiquette and door openings / closings. Yes, brawl. As in, “Go to hell!” got uttered. I was literally seated in the middle of this, trying to finish grading the anemic quizzes I

gave on *The Odyssey* and thinking about new ways to conceive this class in less than two hours. Oy.

Gregory did not come this morning to a more lively session of medieval and early modern Literature. Rather than lecture, I allowed the class time to break into five groups which would give a brief synopsis of a segment of the “medieval Women” cluster from the Norton text, followed by a deliberation on whether the entire section was misogynistic or not. An all-female group was predictably appalled by some of the Church-based writings of Tertullian, Chrysostom, and Capellanus. I was pleased that these groups detected the presence of “original sin” arguments justifying misogynistic behavior. Cassandra and Jacob anchored a lively reading of two works of Marie de France, and Alistair provided a strong reading of Christine de Pisan that seemed to underscore how unprepared the rest of his group was (they worked in stony silence, with all eyes but his reading the text during prep time, and yet he was the only one who spoke—with great attention and pleasure—of the controversial and exciting words of Christine). Efrain, who seems awfully confused in general, raised a point about Christine’s suggestion that woman was created before man—he was utterly baffled by how that could be! Cassandra tried to suggest that Christine was making a “chicken vs. egg” secular argument, but poor Efrain seemed confounded by that possibility. The English language, not his native tongue, is a problem for him, but so, too, are some of the possibilities that are being raised in this class. Off to the *Canterbury Tales* next week, and a really exciting transition to the early modern.

September 28, 2006 6:21 pm

Well, it was an eventful afternoon—one full of delightful surprise and disappointment alike. I was observed in my classics session by a first-year Assistant Professor in the department, who sat quietly (but noticeably) at the door keeping watch. My class—missing seven to absence—behaved with the admirable consideration of cubs protecting their lion. I allowed class time for late-comers by returning quizzes and collecting papers (which amounted to a meager five).

I started class by telling an anecdote that was told me about the classroom as a comedy or tragedy. In the classroom comedy, the professor is the crafty servant, trying to bring the hero to his happy ending (learning, a positive grade, an esoteric classroom purpose) through all impediments (lack of knowledge, laziness, attitude). If the student can not accept the help of the crafty professorial servant, s/he is likely to end up in a tragedy, where the hubris and stubbornness of the hero will lead to crippling ruin (or an F). The humor of these analogies helped mitigate the disappointing quiz grades, and regain some of their confidence on the journey we were about to take.

After emphasizing the importance of adaptation and gender in the class (as much for the observer as for my students), I assigned the five groups a word, which they were to interpret through the lens of Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* and *The Odyssey*. The chosen words: humor, dreams, Odysseus, Helen, and the Maids. Each group examined their word through a comparative lens, exploring how the concept or character functioned in each text, and sharing their findings with the class to establish one final group

“reading” of the text, as they had in previous assignments that established their own plot summaries, character analyses, and conceptual analysis. By the end of the class, I suspect that many of my students had forgotten we were under scrutiny (as I had) and relished the opportunity to tie up these five classes of work that had built to this collective output. I shared my pride with them at class’s end on their accomplishment, and felt all the richer that my smile met with so many from them—particularly people like Marla, Roy, and Diego who had been slow to start but become more active contributors during this set of assignments.

The professor assigned to evaluate me, and before 1:55 a total stranger, was deferential and complimentary, particularly toward my students and their obvious enthusiasm and relish. It is always gratifying to hear that somebody likes your work, but there is also something very reassuring about hearing that your students are perceived as enthusiastic and responsive. It brightened my afternoon.

Sadly, the thunderclouds developed over composition. Absence is becoming a really crippling epidemic—nine absent today made for a smaller room, and continues to create havoc (as one student who missed two days in a row interrupts to demand information on what they missed, for instance). Orlando, still as confrontational with me as he is in group work, interrupted free-writing time (“Aggressive” was today’s word) to berate me for “not approving his work.” I asked if he wanted to talk about it with me at a later time, or would he rather I correct him in front of the whole room (on a related note, I did approve his revised topic while groups were working—which seemed to give him great

relief when I returned the work to him, but made me wonder what powder keg would have been set off if his work had still been incomplete and partially conceived). Dealing with Deborah Tannen's piece on men and women in the workplace, each group was assigned a word, and asked to refract its meanings through the workplace, with some attention to the gender of the word—does it make a difference if hung on a man or a woman? The words were “wimp,” “assertive,” “aggressive” (hyper- and passive- as prefixes for this group to decipher), and “bitch.” Predictably the class made distinctions based mainly on gender—largely with the emasculation of a man who is a wimp or a bitch.

During the group work time, I overheard the answer to a puzzle that had me wondering for a few weeks. In a prior class, Marius called me something behind my back, which most of the class heard, but not me. Today, I overheard Linda, once a favorite of mine, ask Marius, “Isn't this what you called him that time?” (with *me* being the *him* she tilted her head towards, unaware I could also hear her). He shrugged and shushed her. It's probably for the best I didn't hear him call me a “bitch” because there's just no way for that not to end up a confrontational moment—and I have enough with these students.

Amazingly, Marius appears to be taking a real crack at passing this class—feverishly working to get an approved topic. His English is pretty sloppy, but he may just yet pass. Linda, on the other hand, has developed into an utter terror—not turning in assignments, and corrupting Aliah and the already dormant Tommy (he of the showing up with five minutes to go variety) into gigglers and note-passers during free-writing. Their group did

fine work on “bitch”—but largely because Gerry, the Devil’s Advocate pit-bull of the class, did their presenting and defending. The “assertive group” is also coming into its own, with Marybeth carrying a bit of the argument but new voices Lana and Martika also chiming in, loudly, and helping Arthur and Carter to come out of their shells. “Wimp” proved more complicated, as Marnie and Erma did the heavy lifting, while Melanie, separated from Marybeth, seemed to retreat into her shell, and Whit and Mark kept stony silent. The last and most problematic group was the “Aggressive” group, which managed, despite my random assignment of groups today, to be all-male, and very problematic. Orlando and Tommy, who’ve been particularly garrulous, off-topic, and borderline disrespectful, got a chance to get Oscar and Dodi out of their shells—as in to discuss football when they thought I could not hear. They spent twenty minutes discussing football, beer, the fact that Tommy and Linda are seeing each other in some social capacity, and a lot more I didn’t hear, and then had the audacity to ask for more time when I announced that there was five minutes to go in the exercise. Amazing! In the end, they had Antwan perform their entire presentation, which he did, with a certain panache and definite lack of preparation. Antwan has much potential, but not when he is slouching towards the lethargy of his classmates.

(Syllabus) Design for Living

Clearly the development of teaching pedagogy in graduate students is significant to me, and has been in critical writing for some time; John Schilb's 2001 article, "Preparing Graduate Students to Teach Literature: Composition Studies as a Possible Foundation," articulates the importance of teaching composition to the development of both composition pedagogy in graduate students and the skills needed to develop pedagogy in teaching literature (which Schilb posits may not happen as frequently as teaching composition while still a graduate student). But while Schilb responds to the work of Northrop Frye, Elaine Showalter, and Jerome McGann in ways that provide a critical framework for considering graduate student pedagogy in the composition classroom, the section most useful to me is so because of what it lacks. Schilb discusses how he constructs his syllabus for a graduate course he taught on how to teach undergraduate classes, and in the excerpt he provides from the syllabus, he discusses his expectation that the students will be able to write their own syllabus for an undergraduate course under review. What he does not provide is any insight into how he advises these students on how to structure their syllabi, or what information is significant to include in a syllabus based on the development of their pedagogy, or the school's expectations, or standards of the industry. The construction of syllabi can be so crucial to furthering pedagogical aims and yet seems to be critically unarticulated, if passively regarded as necessary and significant.

Some schools may provide you a syllabus when you teach for the first time; some schools may even have a class (like Schilb's) to take in advance to develop your first syllabus. My first time teaching at John Jay, I found out what classes I was teaching a week before the semester started. Thankfully, they had sample syllabi on file for me to peruse, but otherwise, I had freedom and flexibility to determine what I would be teaching. That first semester I hewed very closely to sample syllabi: I was able to peruse examination copies of various writing samplers easily available in the department office to choose one with articles I would enjoy teaching while also being readily available when ordered in those frantic days before the semester started; as the semester progressed, I learned what worked and what didn't work—in the readings, in the assignments, and in the preparation. As you can see from the syllabi in the appendix, I take the preparation of my syllabi quite seriously, for a multitude of reasons that I will be discussing. The rigor of my syllabus is a crutch and a tool for me as a teacher—no matter how inadequate or unprepared I may feel (or think I feel when I record my feelings in a teaching journal), I am not inadequate or unprepared because I have designed a syllabus that tells students what is expected of them, what materials they'll need, and what their assignments are. The well-executed syllabus gives me the tools to design lesson plans and teaching assignments that fit into my objectives for any class, and gives me the freedom to teach in the nondemagogic style that I prefer—my in-class demeanor may be as carefree and personable as my syllabus is rigorous and demanding, because I've set up the expectations of an academic environment in a demonstrable and omnipresent way that allows me freedom to perform in which ever way makes sense for me in that class

session. Is it possible, then, to be truly nondemagogic in teaching philosophy while creating and deploying a rigorous, possibly masterful, syllabus?

The seriousness of the syllabus is heightened when you teach at a school for Criminal Justice, since the notion of the syllabus as a contract (on both sides) is promulgated constantly. A contract has precise language, and so my syllabi are necessarily a sophisticated set of exchanges designed to clearly specify expectations and consequences, and to close off loopholes (since students studying to be lawyers like to find exceptions). Continuing this contractual precision, the syllabus has the exact section, classroom, and class time, since a student may be in the wrong place. The syllabus has precise office hours, office location, and email addresses (plural) so that there are no possibilities of being told “I tried to find you, but...” or “Didn’t you get my email?” The syllabus has exact textbooks, with exact ISBNs, so that they can be in step with their classmates and their professor (and so that the bookstore doesn’t get angry for ordering copies of a book that few students purchased). The course description and course objectives are derived from the course catalog, and tailored specifically to the class in terms of themes that will be explored. The syllabus is designed in every section to be as precise and irreproachable as possible, so that students can focus on the tasks of learning to think, read, and write, not seek exceptions to the rules.

The course policies are particularly stern, in no small part because many of them are designed not to be enforced. A student continually texting in class has never been removed from my class—but that threat, encoded in the syllabus, has allowed me to have

friendly conversations with repeat offenders, pointing to the strictness of the syllabus (never mind that the friendly professor offering “words of wisdom” also *wrote* the syllabus, but many students don’t make that connection). Since I am encouraging students to be expressive and develop their voices, I stress the need to be tolerant and respectful as a rule and an expectation of doing well in the class. The attendance policy is quite strict, since classroom participation is crucial to the group work model I favor, and since assignments are constantly scaffolding on each other (for similar reasons I rarely, if ever, accept late work, since the assignments are designed to be completed at specific moments that will build to a conclusion at semester’s end). The school prescribes the plagiarism policy, but I added the second line about the counterproductivity of plagiarism in a class that emphasizes self-expression and development of your voice. Finally, the assignments are spelled out—the exact grading policies, with exact percentages, and the seemingly obvious points bolded: all graded assignments must be typed & double-spaced. Amazingly, many students continue to ask if they have to type—and luckily, the expectation is clear and bold for me to point to, with a smile, when they ask. The precision and rigor of the syllabus preparation allows me the luxury of smiling through the monotonous questions about expectations, textbooks, percentages, absences, and any new twist that a student devises to try and puncture the rules and regulations of a syllabus designed like a contract.

Each syllabus I taught in this semester is tailored to the specific class/course. In Lit 231, Medieval/Early Modern Literature, the assignments are conventional in no small part because I was assigned the class so late, and so textbook availability became a factor. I

knew the publishing representative for the specific anthology I selected, and knew he could expedite delivery of the books to our bookstore. I also knew the anthology was reasonably priced, and that, with one exception, all of the readings I wished to assign were available. This class covered over a thousand years of literature, and so I chose representative samples across that time frame (one complaint was there was not enough Dante, but I needed to make that sacrifice in order to cover Marie de France, Mandeville's *Travels*, and the units on Petrarch and lyric poetry). Fitting in with my rhetorical aims, a sample class session in September 12 on *Beowulf* endeavored to break free of the lectern and consider the text in new ways through small group work (the impetus for this session was my own improvisation, leaving room in my syllabus planning to respond to the flow of the class, particularly in those early days when we are still getting to know one another). Two groups considered animal cruelty in *Beowulf*, while the other two prosecuted/defended Beowulf's mother. Using a trial motif connects not only with the assignment but also with the school's educational premise, and gives me an opportunity to make comments and direct the flow of questioning and debate (which gave us opportunities to think about the modern justice system versus the chivalric code and to think about honor across these times as well).

The syllabus for Lit 230, Classical Literature, reflected the nontraditional approach I was taking—teaching the course with an emphasis on adaptation, and pairing classic texts with modern interpretations. As a result, the syllabus did not have as much breadth (only one Roman text, *The Aeneid*) but had quite a bit of emphasis on exploring how the influence of these classic texts is felt in our modern arts. Over five classes, we read

Homer's *Odyssey* bookended by reading the first half of Margaret Atwood's retelling, *The Penelopiad*, for the first class, and the second half, in the fifth class. The September 28 class—the fifth and final on these two texts—spent time in groups discussing the modern plot of the Atwood text, and making lists of plot similarities/differences between the texts. The groups then presented their lists, and we as a larger group discussed the importance of gender perception—and questioning our assumptions (I asked if Homer was a woman—and many students naturally assumed Homer was male). I used the opportunity to introduce the notion of the accretive text, and make comparisons with modern blogs, which provoked much conversation about classic vs. modern. The teaching plan allowed for this (and for discussing expectations of writing papers), but left time for these improvisational flourishes, and for the class to establish its own meanings without me telling them we were “out of time.” The carefully planned syllabus should also leave time in the teaching plan for improvisation, and for the class to establish its own terms for discussion.

Of these three syllabi, English 101, College Composition I, had the most self-determined content (since I was unconstrained by area or era in determining the readings). Using an online database, I compiled my own course reader around gender and sexuality issues, selecting from a large database, and supplementing two texts not in their database. The reader retailed for \$36—not cheap, but reasonably priced, and without one wasted page of material that would not be covered. I ordered the assignments in the reader to reflect the subjectivities we'd address and write about in the class—writings about gender (both female and male) and then about sexuality and then about intersections of gender and

sexuality with other subject positions (like race and politics). An early reading is the text of Naomi Wolf's graduation address to Wellesley students, "The Rites of Sisterhood," in which Ms. Wolf gives five rules to live by (including honoring your foremothers, and endowing yourself with the gift of speech). After they've read, a group activity is to debate which of the five messages is "best"; this is both an exercise in debate and in rhetoric, since the students are randomly assigned to groups, and can't choose which they'd want to gravitate towards. This debate also leads to an in-class writing assignment, in which students reflect on how the debate (and arguing a position that might not be their own) showed them the importance of argument, which builds on the importance of argument and developing voice that will be paramount throughout the class.

Syllabus and teaching-plan preparation need not be onerous tasks at semester's start; particularly when using a teaching philosophy that emphasizes a free classroom structure and developing student voices, a strong, clear syllabus can be a significant ally. The assignments and the expectations may differ from one area to another, but the rigor of establishing standards and expectations does not change, so long as you allow the syllabus to fully express your vision for the class, and your teaching plan to scaffold on each lesson to create a rich foundation on which the class can build its learning experience. A firm, clear syllabus need not be representative of a strict, masterful classroom pedagogy, but can rather transcend those expectations by creating a structure of expectations that allows the teacher pedagogical freedom of expression within the classroom.

October: Mourning

October 4, 2006 12:30 pm

I'm struggling here to care about my classroom. Yesterday was a day off for me (using CUNY logic, Tuesday was a Monday this week), so I was not required to be in the office, and I wasn't. I've spent the last weekend relaxing in the 104 degree heat of the Palm Springs desert. I tried to relax, even to surrender to the spirit of vacation or independence, but I concede it's hard to get my head out of the clouds of mourning, or the worries I have for my classes. I'd be in the pool and instead of focusing on my breaststroke, I'd be thinking of whether Gregory is ever going to return to my medieval class. Is Linda going to reform her wicked ways? How'd my evaluation go? Would my mother care?

On our way to the airport, we stopped in Manhattan Beach to indulge our dual California cravings: an In-and-Out burger for Foey, and a Wahoo Ahi tuna burrito at Wahoo's Fish Tacos for me. Foey's burger was traditional and as expected, but the Ahi tuna burrito is off the menu now at Wahoo's, and I was forced to adapt to a regular fish burrito. It was tasty—delicious and thick, with large pieces of whitefish fighting with the cheese and rice for attention—but it was also another moment of being forced to change against my will. As sunset fell, and we were walking along the famed volleyball-net strewn beach, tears streamed out of me, watching the dying of the light over the Pacific, westward bound as sunsets are meant to be experienced. The incomprehensibility that I haven't spoken to my mother in six weeks, and that I can't ever again. It's not as if I am

unfamiliar with death, or that I haven't buried three grandparents so far, but it's as if, this past weekend, I am more childlike than any of my students, with a basic need for comfort—a holding environment, room to play, my mother's nurturing.

I received an email from my aunt before I left, with words of strange comfort and foreignness. She described me as “the light of my mother's life,” which was jarring, because it felt untrue. I've felt like an underachiever for some time now—part of what made me cry on the California beach was the realization that my mother will not see me finish my Ph.D., and never be able to introduce “her son, the doctor.” I longed to realize her desire to have pride in me, and now that will go unfulfilled, regardless of whether I finish or not. That my aunt would choose to say this either means she didn't know, and was grappling for words to comfort me, or that she had insight I am not privy to, and thus is all the more devastating in its revelation. I'm struggling here—now, returned from Palm Springs, not to relax but to engage, to develop curriculum and focus on finishing my semester. I am languishing here, waiting for a sign.

October 10, 2006 12:45pm

I'm indifferent. I taught on Thursday, and I can't begin to tell you what it was I saw or did. I know that over half my freshmen did not have first drafts ready for me, and that of the group that did bring work, quite a bit of it was not up to the minimum standard (at least five pages to be collected), let alone a standard to pass the class (organized, with thesis, following APA style). I'm doing group work on whether *The Iliad* is an anti-war poem or not; the students didn't entirely appear expert on the topic, but they were ready to attack the text and present for today. I'm doing group work on *The Canterbury Tales*

designed entirely to force groups to read the texts enough to answer basic questions—even then, their answers were anemic and indicate that very few have done the reading. Part of this, I suspect, is the ambition of my syllabi. My classics students, bless them all, were baptized by fire—warned that the reading load and book cost were high, warned that there would be ample writing and quizzes, warned that there would be presentations and papers due in the first two weeks. They were prepared, and they’ve been shining brighter than the other stars since. I think the stakes were not held out quite so high for my medieval / early modernists, and they are floundering without them. A pop quiz may become necessary really soon. My composition students may very well have been fooled by reputation. I have been well liked in the past, and my ratings on sites like ratemyprofessors.com are quite high, and full of compliments. However, this semester an anonymous student posted, “toooo many pointless assignments, very serious about his attendance policy, paints an appearance of a nice and easy prof, but its not as it seems” [sic]. Clearly I don’t think my syllabus is filled with pointless assignments or that the seriousness of my attendance policy is a problem, but the jagged comment is the “paints an appearance...” Have I led them astray by being too laid back in the early weeks of the semester? I am more strongly considering revising for a more hellish first two weeks—not only to drive away the lazy, but more importantly, to give some heft to my warnings that writing is not easy. The most frustrating aspect of composition this semester is the unwillingness of my students to see the writing process as arduous or demanding; they seem to think it’s a collection of unnecessary pieces, spokes in a broken wheel evidently.

I'm frustrated, and I am trying not to let it show. I'm angry at my mother, and I have no one to share it with since she doesn't seem to be returning my voicemails. I have no space for myself right now.

Comment

I really was leaving my mother voicemails, on her work number. No one ever called me to admit they were listening, but I suspect I was bewildering some new civil servant, replacing my mother at City Hall, with rambling, often dull messages for a clearly dead lady.

October 10, 2006 7:02pm

Patience is a virtue. I found myself listening to hastily put-together or conceived-by-one-person group presentations on whether *The Iliad* is anti-war or pro-war. The presentations were unengaging and dreary—the better-researched ones were dull and lifeless, and the more animated students were tap-dancing around the fact that they had barely read, or couldn't pronounce Achilles, or hadn't communicated as a group and were missing obvious connections. Moreover, I couldn't contain my obvious boredom—which was clear from the glances I was getting, and the whispers in the audience in my direction. With that all said, I was in deep trouble of losing the class to my frustration and lethargy and annoyance, all at once.

And so, to turn straw into gold, as the final group terminated its work, I asked the class, "Am I interested?" The vast majority immediately voiced, "No." And I said, "Why?"

And the shrugs came and the whispers of “We weren’t good” or “You’ve heard it all before.” I used this as a moment to reinforce that this was an ungraded assignment—a trial run, if you will, for a graded group presentation on *Antigone* in a few weeks—and an opportunity to learn from their mistakes. I told them that my seeming boredom was because of all of the above: I’ve heard it all before, the talks were largely lifeless, some seemed improvised on the spot, and a lot of connections weren’t being made. I let them know I wouldn’t be forgiving about these mistakes come November.

For as unconnected as I feel to my composition students, my classics class responds to me. Lynette and Christian came up after class to ask my perspective on their group, and they came off as genuinely concerned about my perception; that’s heartening. Nancy wanted to know if the grading would take into consideration unequal work preparation. Wilbur wanted to know if they seemed polished enough. Many more simply were smiling and nodding when I spoke to them about their performance. They pick me up.

And then my composition students let me back down. When I walked in at 3:34, one minute before class starts, I had eight students in the room, and they had a collective smirk as if the mass amounts of tardies and absences reflected somehow on me. Or am I just paranoid? No, I suspect they think I have lost the room—indeed, the giggles and chatter during free-writing (today’s word: “Performance,” followed by a separate writing piece on “Drag”) indicates a dare for me to crack down. We had read a piece by Laura Sells on how a protest at Wellesley regarding Barbara Bush’s selection as commencement speaker related to the performance options for women in *The Little*

Mermaid. It's a sophisticated text that baffles students most semesters, but given the reading comprehension issues this semester, I was not surprised by the problems. When I announced that most students have trouble with this piece, the relief was palpable on their faces. I announced that in lieu of formal group work today, I was going to put up four phrases on the board, along with the already listed "Performance" and "Drag," and that we would be talking, in small groups, about how these terms functioned in the piece. The other words: "Wellesley graduates," "Barbara Bush," "Ariel," "Ursula" (the last two characters from *The Little Mermaid*). I assigned four groups (by the time attendance was taken, our numbers had swelled to eighteen), and circled the room continuously, working out how each group examined the words—how they perceived performance, drag, and the agents in the text. This went on for nearly 30 minutes, after which we began speaking in open format, with me drawing on the board—making distinctions about what it means to "be" a woman versus "acting" as a woman; making distinctions between nature and nurture, essentialist and constructionist; and finally, pointing them to the ways to construct a "Compare-and-contrast" paper, which they will be doing next week with this piece and the next we read. How can we compare Barbara Bush and Ursula, for instance, or Ariel to the Wellesley grads? How can we contrast Ursula with Ariel? With the Wellesley grads?

I also added a pat on their backs—however disingenuous it was—for making it through this far. I congratulated them for doing their work—their hard work on their first drafts, the work we do in class, the work we do in showing up. At this point, I will thank them for drawing breath if it will get them in class on time, frisky but respectful, and doing

consistent writing. I don't understand how they think they are going to pass a writing class without writing! I shared my feelings with Writing Program head Mark McBeth, and he reiterated that I should stay focused and not give up on them just yet. That's easy enough to say, harder still to implement, and even more arduous given my utter lack of desire to be here. Still, today was a positive sign for me in getting back the trust of that room, and getting my own spirit in position to be a good guide for them...

It has also been a frustrating day because I began a standard purification process today. This is something my friend Lizzie has been doing now twice a year and she tells me that not only is it great for losing weight, it's great for renewing your body. Right now I feel like the only thing being renewed is my stock in Sara Lee—I'm sluggish, very cranky, downbeat, and most of all, exhausted. I am ready to crash.

October 11, 2006 2:28 pm

I've slept fourteen hours, and I feel like I gave birth to a watermelon. Through my head. Still, I persist. I cheated on my purification non-diet last night with one slice of whole-wheat pizza. It tasted so good, and I felt so bad, that I nearly cried, and went to sleep almost immediately thereafter. I dread teaching tomorrow while feeling this way—particularly since I've no energy to even type this.

October 12, 2006 8:02 pm

Today was as static and unpleasant a day in my teaching life as there has ever been.

Yesterday I found out that my mother's cause of death has been fixed: accidental overdose, based on elevated blood alcohol content (0.22) and an overdose of Ambien (roughly 25 times the accepted therapeutic level). I'm still a bit staggered by this—I can't decide whether it's good news or not. There's a reason now; there is logic, there is a timeline, there is evidence, there is finality. And yet, we can't still determine if she meant to or not. I will always wonder whether my mother chose to terminate herself, no matter how much of a public face I put on that "accidental death" lingo. I was pretty inconsolable and irrelevant last night, and then I realized I had to teach today.

I let my medieval/early modern students work in groups on *The Thousand and One Nights*. I constructed these exercises as a way of boosting class participation, and forcing them to do some reading (since clearly a portion of the class is not). Each group is given a topic, and then they must post their response on our Blackboard page for the class. I spent the class responding to their posts from their *Canterbury Tales* work—asking follow-up questions and providing feedback. Strangely, this tactic appears to be working. I've rounded the room, making sure questions were answered ("What exactly are the seven deadly sins?" was routinely asked of me) and that they were communicating. Clearly some groups dawdle (Efrain and his four ladies in Group One clearly spend more time discussing the newspaper but they also post their responses very quickly and succinctly) and kill time (Cassandra, Denise, Erik, and friends have theirs done in twenty minutes, and then compare notes about their other classes, and preparations for graduation), but they are all doing good work, somehow.

My class today on *Oedipus Rex* was structured around yet another rhetorical exercise in showing them how to look at these texts with fresh eyes, while also honoring traditional nodes of academic interpretation. I assigned the five groups to look at one topic, with a specific quest to list as many quotes as they could find in the text related to their topic. The topics: sight & blindness, human confidence in our own intelligence, Oedipus as plowman, Oedipus as hunter, Oedipus as sailor-helmsmen. I guided each group to see their topics outside of the literal—Oedipus as “plowman” can also denote quotes regarding reaping unholy soil, i.e. his mother. The groups have learned to work consistently with each other—after three weeks of assigned groups, they were so excited to be allowed the opportunity to work with their friends that they actually *worked!*

The actual delivery of quotations, with analysis, was solidly done—and fit my intent nicely, as the first group—the smugly off-topic Marjane, Edward, Diego, and others—managed to not find quotes truly related to Oedipus as hunter, but rather made some arguments work with quotes not as judiciously chosen. In contrast, Arnetia, Lynette, Leanne, and Krystle found every quote I was looking for on Oedipus as plowman. I used these examples, and the work in between, to demonstrate how papers could be made more effective by including the right quote. I also brought up that, since their topics are assigned at the beginning of the semester, they can keep track of what they intend to write about *while they are reading* and accordingly keep track of good quotes (red pen, a cornered page, whatever technique works for that student). To be fair to the smug group (who often spend their entire group time chatting about the Mets, and then assemble a

presentation in three minutes at the end), I let them know that theirs was a fair job—that not every paper needs to have their quotes coincide so completely with mine. That is the flexibility of my teaching pedagogy—that I don't expect to have the answer, or all the answers, or even any answers.

Again, the class seemed responsive and upbeat by the end. It's gratifying to spend time with them before my composition students.

Today, when I arrived at my classroom, a number of my students were waiting outside the class door. I thought perhaps they were going to ambush me, or complain, or ask some question outside my capacity at that moment, but when I said, "What's going on?" they arose, en masse and joined me in heading toward the classroom door. Martika, with bigger hair today, told me, "Oh, we were just chillin'..." I'm not sure how I should feel about this.

I returned two papers—to Veronica and Marnie—that did not even reach four pages. The stated minimum for this first draft was five pages, and I took the papers that were 4+, but each of theirs was under four. They took the news with grace, as I had privately pulled them aside—out of the class's glare. I also told them (hoping to spur them on) that I would accept the revised papers on Tuesday without further penalty.

Within five minutes of class, a loud cell phone went off, and Orlando, already such a troublemaker, took the call, and left the classroom while engaging the conversation. Also

during free-writing (topic: “tradition”), Erma’s cell phone went off, for an extended period. Lots of laughter ensued. On a day in which I planned goodwill toward them—to help plan their next papers on class time—I was forced to lay into them.

I read from the syllabus my policy on cell phone usage: “*Cell-phone usage will not be tolerated.* Please turn off your devices prior to entering the classroom; repeated violations will count against your grade, and documented disruptions will lead to your *removal* from the class.” I emphasized that they were collectively warned.

That cast pallor over the proceedings which I attempted to brighten by announcing that I was tossing out the planned group work for the day in order to do a more concentrated examination of the texts that they would be using for their assigned compare-and-contrast paper for Tuesday. We had already reviewed Laura Sells’s article and now we were covering an article by Eisa Davis in which she reveals her disillusionment with Queen Latifah after she released an album that was largely R&B and about love rather than the empowered woman Davis had patterned herself on a few years prior.

I established terms—“bitches,” “hos,” “self-definition,” “rap culture”—and then reiterated the assigned question:

In “Sexism and the Art of Feminist Hip-Hop Maintenance,” author Eisa Davis remembers how Latifah represented one of the first “recognizable ideals” she could find as a black woman establishing her identity in the late 1980s. How does her confusion

over Latifah's changing images of womanhood and femininity connect with the dilemma faced by Wellesley students over the selection of Barbara Bush as commencement speaker in "Where Do the Mermaids Stand?: Voice and Body in *The Little Mermaid*"?

We then reviewed the basic plots of the two texts, and we outlined (as in A. a. I. 1. etc.) on the board the salient points to their assigned paper—putting compare items and contrast items into different columns. We discussed the importance of understanding who the authors are, and how the "people" in the article are functions of the text, not "real" in the way that we would conceive of them as. Lots of heads nodded, lots of pens were moving.

I reviewed a basic paper-writing technique that my colleague Adam Berlin had mentioned to me earlier in the day, and it was met with lots of shock and awe. I described the five paragraph paper model, with the first an introductory paragraph, finishing with a clearly identifiable thesis statement. The three middle paragraphs of body each constitute "TEA": Topic, Evidence, and Analysis. I had to explain how evidence can be presented without context, or how opinion can be presented without evidence, and how those two paper types were crippling them. I gave the fifth paragraph as conclusion—a frame that connects the introduction through the body to provide a summation on what you showed.

It was an exhausting class, and I am still unsure that I have brought them back to motivated—my fear is that they are collectively lazy and that no amount of me bending

to meet them will elicit any work, let alone good work or improved output. But I am still here, trying—and very tired.

Comment

Patrick Hartwell articulated the notion over twenty years ago that good grammar is not directly linked to logical thinking or illiteracy. He continued, in the vein of Mina Shaughnessy, to document grammar issues as failures of performance and, thus, as spaces where power can be transferred from professor to student. That there was and has been great debate since is incontrovertible—many comments, dizzying, with empirical data on both sides. Ed Vavra’s “On Not Teaching Grammar” argues that “both sides” are wrong, and that we must focus on teaching educators to be more aware of syntactic development and encourage our students to become more analytic of their own work regarding grammar. I’m ambivalent about the uses of all of these arguments, since they are largely truistic and yet unable to chart a single course applicable for any and all professors. Grammar is important. Yes. In following the course of my grading philosophy, there are moments in which I am very strict on grammar rules—yet, careful to be sure that any corrections are accompanied by comments on why the infraction of the rule harms the presentation of their ideas (and the development of these ideas and perspectives is paramount to me). This last point is particularly relevant to handling ESL students. The more I read about grammar, the less I want to think about it. I cannot believe that spending multiple hours on comma splices is going to make my students smarter.

October 13, 2006 7:46 pm

I am at the Graduate Center, having just worked pouring wine and cleaning up after an English Department event. My tooth is throbbing from a three-hour dental session with my sweet but inexperienced dental apprentice in which he made me bleed so hard the novocaine wore off, and only one of the three fillings that were to be replaced came to be replaced. I've been hurting, and I can't drink because of my purification plan.

I spoke with the bare minimum of people; so many were drinking and mirthful, and I was unable to nosh on the cheese or partake in the inexpensive South American wines, as my purification diet is not allowing for it. I am cranky and the bags under my eyes are huge. I haven't shaved in four weeks, and I look shaggy and a touch unkempt. I have no desire to be here; I *had* no desire to be here. So many people I consider friends were here tonight, and I just couldn't bring myself to talk to them. It's purgatory for me; I'm just stuck, and I want to kick and scream, but I can't move, inert, stuck here. I want my mom. I want a slice of olive and pineapple pizza and a pint of Ben and Jerry's. I want to stop feeling so abreacted, all the time.

Comment

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has written in *Touching Feeling* that “while the sickbed or deathbed is continually produced as a privileged scene of teaching, the assignment of pedagogical roles is unstable.” (176). My mourning process seems to be in constant flux of teaching and learning, designing and improvising. Andrew Solomon's *The Noonday Demon* chronicles the mapping of depression (in vast and often illuminating ways). One notion he promulgates is the idea of an exoskeleton—support groups providing stability

and giving life when your psyche is too broken to do the work for itself. I've often thought this is partially true—we do rely on exoskeletons, but those that are effective are “performative”: these are exoskeletons that demand that we do something for ourselves in order to effect our betterment. In Solomon's case, it is not the support group that is the curative (although it is an exoskeleton); it is the act of choosing to attend that performs the exoskeleton, and mollifies the self by providing relief. So many moments during that semester I felt the crushing weight of my grief, but found solace in writing (what T.S. Eliot termed “dark embryos” and Christopher Bollas has discussed as the genera that provide healing through creative endeavor). Words (and conceiving them) provided me an exoskeleton, and choosing to write, regularly, performed it.

Michael Balint has addressed the “harmony” of the alcoholic (a harmony no doubt shattered by the death of my mother's brother three days prior to her own): “The yearning for this feeling of harmony is the most important cause of alcoholism. The alcoholic in his despair drinks more and more in order to maintain his harmony with the world created by alcohol” (56). Thinking about my mother, drinking to create harmony and inadvertently destroying her body by mixing in 13 small pills, allows my own addictions (food, security, television) to kick in at this point. Reenacting my own nuclear scripts of overeating and crying when confronted by adversity (scripts that were created in my pre-teens and largely abated by my mid-twenties) permitted me to work with Melanie Klein's suggestion of mourning as reinscribing not just the lost loved one but also the good parents (and thus double inscription when the lost loved one is also the good parent). Rather than enact my mother's addiction/script of choice, I reverted to the safety of my

own childhood scripts, and continued such enactment until I no longer needed the performative safety of the behavior. Similarly, once this semester's journal was completed, I stopped writing for many months, since the process provided a type of mourning that I moved through in the months that followed. Once I began writing again, it no longer felt palliative, but rather became an extension, again, of my professional self or my avocational pursuits.

October 17, 2006 11:00pm

I've had another odd day at the work front. My students are addressing *A Thousand and One Nights*, and dealing with the issues of atypicality—a Muslim text unlike other Muslim texts, one that is also really the only Muslim text taught widely in Western lit courses. They want to interject modern (anachronistic) interpretations, which I have to encourage them to rein in in order to keep some sense of historicity: this is not a large problem when dealing with gender roles, but regarding Muslim faith and culture, there is still such a gulf stemming from a post-9/11 (lack of) understanding.

My classics students continue to shine. Today we read an odd play by Giuseppe Manfredi called *Cuckoos* that is based on *Oedipus Rex*. Tito is sodomizing Beatrice, and gets stuck in her rectum. His father, Tobia, arrives, and in the process of extricating the boy, a labyrinth of relationships is revealed, culminating with the discovery that Beatrice is Tito's mother, and that dim Tito has accidentally killed his real father in a parachuting accident years earlier. The onus, of course, is on adaptation—in what ways did Manfredi (and his English translator, Colin Teevan) utilize the core themes of *Oedipus*? Are there

direct parallels (references to blindness, for instance), or cultural adaptations (such as British slang that appears)?

Tying into a prior class on comedy and tragedy, I posed a quote I found from a Yale drama student online to the class: “In comedy, we try to make everything absurd. But in farce, we make the outrageous normal.” I then asked the students to determine whether *Cuckoos* was a farce or a comedy. Two students—Arnold and Roy—selected comedy. Seven more believed it a farce. The remaining dozen were unsure. I grouped the class into those three cohorts, and asked them to back up their case. Naturally, they began figuring out that the play can fit either definition—certainly the “stuck-in-the-rectum-while-in-a-parachute” situation is farcical, and throughout the play there are situations of broad comedy and situations also played “straight.” The ensuing class discussion about comedy and farce, and then how they tie back to tragedy—*Oedipus Rex*—was animated and exciting. Lynette, often so quiet, was forceful speaking for the ambivalent group for why they felt it fit both definitions. Arnold and Roy both were hesitant, but both put up good reasons—quotes and all—why the piece is dark humor. And Amalia—smart in her papers and quiet in class—took the lead in defining farce, with help from the always-loquacious Nancy. They have taken to this interactive work with the classics, and “owning” their interpretations and readings as proudly as they would their own papers. They “got” the adaptation angle—including the translation point I made—so naturally and fluidly.

I still have a few snickering students in the front—Marjane, Diego, Elvin in particular are flashing each other looks and giggling at even the slightest comment I make. I can't tell whether these behaviors are directed at my approach, or me, but so far it's relatively harmless—mainly because they are isolated from the mainstream of that class, which follows along with me and does the work they are asked with guidance but without resistance. This cannot be said for my English 101 class, which is increasingly worrying me. I made a calculated effort to regain the interest of the remaining students—once again I started class with fewer than ten, and ended up with fourteen (out of twenty-eight). Of the fourteen, eleven were those who had turned in their first drafts of their research papers on time—and eleven retrieved this work. Eleven was also the number who did their compare and contrast paper on time. I gave the other three the opportunity to “get out of jail free” and do the paper, without penalty, for me this Thursday. I told the class that on an individual basis I would forgive the moments of not turning in work I was looking to collect—provided they got caught up, and continued to invest themselves in the writing process. As I had told a colleague earlier in the day, “I'm looking at failing half that class already—I don't want to end up failing twenty-something of them.” I have my department's support if I end up with such a high failure rate, but it is still early enough in the semester for me to reach out to the students who are *discouraged*—but not lazy or surrendered. People like Linda, who was once so enthusiastic, and Melanie, who has begun skipping odd classes because she doesn't have her work done. I think I can get them on board.

I said, “It’s funny how every class has its own identity, and how one class shapes my plans for the next. Last semester, many students complained that they never saw grades in the portfolio process and so I designed this semester so that you would be getting periodic grades on assignments—to give you a sense of where your writing is, not necessarily where your grade will *end up*. This is a *portfolio* class—we are building you into better writers! These grades are hardly firm. What they were meant to do is give you guidance, to give you a wake-up if you were not with it or doing your work. It was meant to motivate the people taking zeroes into harder workers, to save their grades. Instead, I suspect I scared you [many groan here, including Tommy, who ironically never turns in work so I can’t tell how he was scared]. I don’t want you to be scared. I want you to take this moment and turn this semester around with me—to get on board and do some constructive work that will make you a better writer this semester, and for the remaining four years you have here.” The talk went over well—so many more smiling faces (to me and each other) during the exercise on sentence fragments that I assigned (but did not grade). I also exempted them from doing the next writing assignment—asking those who wanted extra help and feedback to do the response paper, but otherwise to take it as an opportunity to do the reading for class on Thursday, and to do the writing that I suspected they were behind on.

Despite a class in which I felt I built bridges, a disturbing situation emerged that I fear I will have to address. While we reviewed the sentence fragment worksheet, I asked that students say aloud whether the answer was “C” for correct or “F” for fragment. Soon this turned into saying “frag” aloud. As anyone who knows juveniles would suspect, this

quickly deteriorated to certain students saying, “fag,” hiding their slurs in the collective “frag” speech. Tommy was doing this—and smiling to Linda, who seemed less willing to laugh at him than she has in past weeks. Aliah laughed, but didn’t participate. Marybeth kept looking back at Orlando with disgust—his looks back and forth with Tommy led me to notice he was part of the “fag” chorus. It wasn’t many, but it was noticeable—certainly to me, and likely to all of my students. Orlando and Tommy are also weak writers who are not showing much resilience—Tommy has yet to write a proposal that I have approved, since he keeps turning in the same variation in which he shows no purpose or resources for a wildly broad topic. Orlando does lazy work with no research—his paper had been altered at the margins and font to make three pages appear to be five. He rambled wildly about his opinion without offering one whit of research, evidence, or analysis. He also appeared disgusted at class’s end by my comments on his paper, not to mention his failing grade on the “proofreading quiz” (essentially a review of the integrity of work done on peer reviews, which meant showing an effort would pass, and writing less than ten sentences in an hour would not constitute passing). I grade on a check-plus, check, and check-minus system. Since each student reviews two peers, the two grades add up—two check-pluses is an A, two check-minuses an F, and other combinations in between. Most students ended up with an A or a B—answering the questions and writing constructive comments on the “essay” section yielded that grade rather easily. In an hour-long peer review session, Orlando managed to write fewer than ten sentences total—largely “Yes” or “He did a good job.” I overheard him complain, after class, that he “answered every question, so he shouldn’t have failed.” Not sure how

that logic works, but it does fit his surly demeanor. I fear he will make trouble in that class.

Arthur committed plagiarism, which was sad. He is very quiet, and withdrawn, and has largely done no work this semester, save one poorly organized paper in the second week. His paper on pornography and women's rights was so polished that I feared for him nearly immediately. Much of the work was cribbed from sources he mentioned, but I found at least one section in which he cut-and-pasted one-and-a-half pages of material from a website, verbatim. What was also glaring was how unpolished and clunky his sentence constructions were on the final page—when he attempted to conclude the paper in his own voice. I am looking at his compare and contrast paper, due today, now and the work is disjointed and illogical—probably his own work. He left class without staying behind to talk to me, as I directed him to in my note to him. I will have to fail him, as his plagiarism is egregious and unquestionable, but I am a bit saddened by the development. One thing I felt unified these students was their laziness quotient—I didn't think they had plagiarism in them because that at least would take some research and cunning to attempt, let alone pull off. Arthur also *looks* like a nice person. Perhaps it is deceiving, but I feel rather defeated by his actions, and I can't imagine him having an argument that will persuade me otherwise.

Comment

I believe strongly that academic freedom means that we have to give our students the freedom to be homophobic (or racist/sexist, etc.). I want them to question *why* they are feeling as they do (if being gay is “contagious,” for instance, I want an explanation for

the logic behind that argument). My responsibility is not to tell them they are wrong, but to question how they come to arguments and perspectives that are potentially inflammatory or problematic (and sometimes, that is how I address it—by telling them they are potentially inflammatory or problematic, and they should be prepared to defend their beliefs). There is a position that we are morally and ethically responsible to better our students by not tolerating potential hate speech (David Wallace’s “Out in the Academy” is a particularly persuasive argument for making yourself and your partisanship visible in the academy)—but there is a difference between slurs and phobic perspectives (however equally pernicious). Richard Miller’s “Fault Lines in the Contact Zone” addresses how to address a homophobic paper, offering multiple spheres of dealing with it (dismiss it as personal opinion, silently disregard it, or flunk it for the content of the speech). I’d like to think that, in the same ways I recognize my own subject position and its construction, our students have the same capacity, and we need to acknowledge that when dealing with controversial or personally offensive work.

If “fag” is gay language that is reclaimable in the ways Joseph Hayes articulated in “Gayspeak,” then self-disclosing as a “fag” would declaw the word, although it would also “out” me in ways I am uncomfortable doing for pedagogical reasons already outlined. Using the word “fag” without properly disclosing myself as a member of that subject group would then partition me with the heterosexist institutions that use such language to ghettoize and slur. William Leap has articulated ways in which gay discourse can be determined by following what Irigaray called “among-themselves”—gay language and gay discourse can be best determined when gays socialize and theorize

among themselves. While this is a long-term strategy that might alleviate the problem of slurs in the classroom by helping society work out its homophobia, it is not a short-term solution. If my students are going to be uncomfortable with the readings, then they can go sit in front of a mirror all day—but they aren't going to improve their writing, or get any credit for it. Responsible assignments and syllabus work ensures that I have done my job to change such perspectives. I have to hold on to that and endure the silly moments, if I hope to change those who indulge in such hurtful (if delivered frivolously) speech directed at me. I believe the “fag/frag” episode was in “fun” and not meant to be incendiary; that isn't to say that it isn't incendiary on principle, but starting disciplinary action against teenagers for being stupid isn't going to change them—getting them to examine *why* it's stupid and hateful will.

October 18, 2006 12:16pm

I miss my mother. If I interrupted my work, my television watching, my paper grading each time I had a flash of memory involving my mother—each time anything triggered a fleeting reminiscence or sensation—I'd likely never breathe again. This morning I read that my colleague and friend Chris Suggs lost his mother—I'm unclear on the circumstances, or her age, although given Chris is in my mother's cohort, it's akin to my grandmother passing—and it all ran through me. My own mother. My eagerness to share my experiences—to export and project mine onto his, much as certain people constantly endeavored to do to me and my brothers eight weeks ago. I've still been fingering her amethyst pendant—I haven't been wearing it lately, but I find myself holding it, caressing it with careful attention to its contours, nurturing and protecting the

pendant from harm. I'm a bit baffled as to why I do this, though I suspect I'm missing something obvious.

I want to reach out to Chris, but I'm so close to my own responses in the direct aftermath that I am pausing. What rankled me was when people were unnatural, or when they projected their feelings onto me ("You will feel..." this or that) without allowing me the courtesy or privilege of *actually* feeling it. I will drop an email today of sympathy, and when I next see him, I'll tell him I'm sorry. I won't tell him I know what it feels like, because I don't. And nobody knows what it is I am feeling.

Today I went to call Mom. I could hear her banally avoiding discussing her life—discussing how work was, or how the house was developing—rather than opening up about her struggles with her weight recently, or her constant Sisyphean battle with box wine. I wanted to ask her to check the Christmas Tree Shop for more of those magnetic 4x6 plastic picture frames I have covering my refrigerator—since her funeral, we've discovered a treasure trove of photographs, and I wanted to add some of my family's history to the current panoply of travel photos. I've seen the world, but I'll never see her again. It perhaps makes sense of my recent dreams of the Australian Outback—truly mysterious, desolate, and alluring. It may very well be the outskirts of the world. It may very well be where I think I'll find her—desolate and alluring, the Yelena to so many men's Vanya, bored and waiting to be shaken from the doldrums of her afterlife.

My mother has no grave. She's been cremated and she is in a box now at a funeral home, awaiting pickup. Eventually she will join her mother, released into a pond where they spent many summers when Mom was a child, and where she spent many summers near the end of her life. When I swam in that pond this last July, three weeks before my mother died, I was alone—the rain clouds had moved in, and the light sprinkles began as I dove in. I felt weirdly close to my grandmother—who has long become a few specks of sand and pebbles in the bottom of the pond—but I kept waiting for my mother to arrive (though I knew she was passed out in her cabin). Every time I swam out around the sailboat that was tethered at the end of my breathing capacity, and held on to its ropes for steadiness while I regained my balance, I looked back to shore, waiting for Mom to join me. As I was incredibly vexed at her at that moment, it struck me as odd even then that I was so profoundly desirous of her company. Perhaps I simply wanted her to share the stillness—the sense of being able to feel my grandmother's essence in the echoes of the pine trees swaying into the light winds of the nascent storm, but now I'll always wonder if I was anticipating her final voyage into that pond.

I went to her that weekend with no agenda, no reason, and no purpose. I wanted to get out of New York, and I was dreaming of swimming in that pond. As schedules or fates would allow, my mother was on vacation that week, and had chosen to spend the week alone at the pond. When I was able to reach her via cell phone (her signal there was intermittent, at best), she quickly and graciously assented to my weekend visit, and agreed to pick me up at the train (a twenty-minute drive, hardly an inconvenience). That we fought bitterly that weekend should come as no surprise to anyone who has ever loved

an alcoholic. While drunk, my mother shattered me that weekend: by her viciousness and her utter contempt for me. During the few sober moments, she was as demonstrably loving as she ever was—hugging me, telling me how proud she was of me, playing cribbage with strong Folgers and chatting about men, politics, family, and death, among many other things covered between fifteens, thirty-ones, and double runs (for the record, we split games that weekend, 5 apiece, never getting around to playing a grand finale). My mother in many ways cursed me with those final conversations—in the aftermath of her sudden and shocking death, I’ve had insight into where she was emotionally, mentally, and psychologically in her final weeks that has brought me into conflict with those who wish to believe alternate versions. It’s largely forced me to shut my mouth—I have the fortitude of truth to back me, when necessary, and I have the certainty of knowing—at least knowing what she told me, not necessarily if she was ever lying to me.

I mention that because an aunt with whom I am warm (but not close) told me, at my uncle’s wake (the day before my mother’s death) that she got a frantic phone call from my mother the day I called her to ask if I could join her at the pond. My mother was so worried that something must be wrong—since I only come home for holidays, or if something isn’t right. It never occurred to her that I wanted to see her—even less than a year after we took a cruise to Bermuda on our own, bonding as much as we could (when she wasn’t brazenly imbibing the ship stock of Southern Comfort) across the choppy October North Atlantic. It never penetrated that thick, stubborn, unforgiving skull of hers that she was loved—and that her love was received. And since nothing was wrong, my

mother made things wrong—by drinking, by abusing me, by abusing herself and her body, in a trial run for her own death less than a month later.

I've got a lot to say to that woman. She's just not returning her voicemail (and frankly, I shudder for whoever listens to them).

Comment

David Eng and David Kazanjian (in introducing their volume *Loss*) articulate, “what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read and sustained” (2). I'd like to think this coincides with Christopher Bollas's articulations of psychic genera and the use of “dark embryos” to generate any work that concomitantly is therapeutic and artistically productive. In the same volume as Eng and Kazanjian, Butler interprets Benjamin on mourning to liken it to a lining of a skirt, which articulates mourning as a material space incorporating a new relationship to a limb. This notion differs from my preferred one, of the good internal object from the work of Melanie Klein, though it is no less relevant. Deborah Britzman, in *After Education*, has written persuasively about the links between Anna Freud and Klein (despite their disagreements) on loneliness: “For both, loneliness became a fragile bridge necessary for thinking to cross from the emptiness of loss and anxiety to the poignant work of mourning and reparation. Turning to experiences of loss and reparation, of absence and presence, they argued, could both allow for the significance of configurations of conflicts made in human vulnerability and offer a way to accept, interpret, and learn from the emotional qualities of thinking itself” (149-150).

I was aware of Klein and the good object when I attended to my mother's coffin—seizing the moment to take stock of every nuance of her face, of the imperfect way her amethyst necklace (the one I wore to class all semester after she died) fell to the right of her collarbone, no matter how many times I tried to straighten it on her corpse. As Sontag opined regarding cameras and death, the ability to seize death in the flesh trumped all other forms of mementos and so, in a Proustian flourish of flattening and memorializing images in words and feelings (“for we exist only through what we possess” said Marcel in the wake of Albertine's passing in *The Fugitive*), this mourning started with an intensive memorizing of my mother's corpse, and continued with a typed onslaught of how I survived (by teaching; Didion, in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, details how she used reading and researching as a performative tool for reparation and healing (46-49)). Sontag, still in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, wrote that “Memory is, achingly, the only relation we can have with the dead. Heartlessness and amnesia seem to go together” (115). Andrew Holleran's *Grief* seems an extended meditation on heartlessness and amnesia, on gay aging and permitting grief to permeate even a “crustacean” life. And so, with eyes wide open, I set out to create the most vivid, unforgettable corpse that I could lock away in my heart.

Bataille, reflecting on a grisly photograph in *The Tears of Eros*, acknowledges “I have never stopped being obsessed by this image of pain, at the same time ecstatic and intolerable” (234). The corpse, ostensibly “at peace,” nonetheless represents my own intolerable pain, which doesn't seem to abate or numb as time progresses. As my mother grieved her mother for thirteen years after her death, I suspect I will grieve as vigorously

for the decades to come. Joan Acocella discusses the author M. F. K. Fisher and the genesis of her work in the wake of her husband's suicide: *The Gastronomical Me*, which Fisher said was "conceived and written and typed in ten weeks," Acocella noted was "gestated a fatherless child" (375). In the wake of her passing, my mother has given me a motherless child: this narrative, and the reflection and analysis that have shaped it since.

My mother was not buried, since we knew she wished to be cremated and scattered, along with her mother, by her childhood summer home, in a pond within a Massachusetts forest. So we never heard the Episcopalian minister tell us that "In the midst of life we are in death," as Joan Didion did. I felt robbed when I reread that—feeling that this would have been a comforting maxim for the minister to pronounce. Frankly, I barely remember her funeral—choking, as I was, on the eulogy I needed to give, the minister may very well have reminded us about death in our midst; I wouldn't have known. I remember when the coroner asked, as politely and discreetly as possible, whether we wanted an autopsy (the decision fell to me as her oldest child, and not to her husband); the terror of them cutting into my mother overwhelmed me so profoundly that I crumpled to the ground of my apartment (for neither the first or the last time that night, or early morning). Klein said in her essay on mourning that "the mourner is in fact ill, but because this state of mind is common and seems so natural to us, we do not call mourning an illness" (353). Didion feels as though this mourning is an obstacle or impediment we overcome. I suspect it will always be with me, deeply held as a cherished object of indeterminate quality.

My mother's last words to me were: "I love you." She wasn't good at that—declarations of love—unless she was rather drunk. Of course, she probably was. We'd buried my uncle—the first of her seven siblings to pass away—that morning, and she was acting weird. Instead of departing the post-funeral party (my maternal family is Irish, in nature and mostly in blood) with the traditional "Dunfey wave," reserved for fast getaways, she'd hugged virtually every person in attendance—up to and including people she couldn't stand. I commented to my cousin, as we watched the unusual show, that something wasn't right. She and her husband swept me out of that wake and put me minutes later on a train to Boston to catch a bus to New York, so I could attend a theatrical opening that night. My mother clutched her pearl and silver necklace (which had belonged to her mother, and she'd only begun wearing the night before) while she kissed me goodbye. She looked old—she'd begun looking like her mother, with the grey creeping into the bouffant hairstyle, and the flowing collars of her poly-blend tops reminiscent of my grandmother's vaunted 1970's "Maude" styling.

I went home. I ate Thai food. I saw a (bad) play about vapid gay people who listen to too much Blondie. My mother died. I missed fourteen calls from three numbers. I knew something was wrong when I saw those stats. Two new voicemail. One: my baby brother, who works with toxic materials for a living, sobbing into the phone and demanding I call him. I muttered: someone else is dead. Two: my baby brother calmly but devastatingly (using my Rose Kennedy voice for dealing with adversity) asking me to call him as soon as possible. I announced to Foey that my mother was dead. He didn't register what I said. I called Tom. He said it's Mom. I told him no. He said she was

just dead, in bed. No one knows anything. Jim [my stepfather] sounds devastated. I told him no. And then I proceeded to punch the nightlights out of my foyer's poor canary-colored wall for a minute.

Foey realized something was wrong. I realized I owed my mother five bucks. I realized I needed to take care of things—New Yorkers like me do not have cars. I'd need to get the next bus to Boston and get a lift to Nashua. Three hours till the next bus. We'd need to find Frank's phone number in London and get him home to cremate his mother. Foey kept trying to hold me, but that made no sense to me, because my mother needed me. I realized she must be dead, because I am logical and rational, but it was unfathomable, and cruel.

There were many phone calls in the next three hours, and I barely remember them. Except the coroner's call—his careful concern to delicately ask if I wanted to cut my mother open. I refused to let them cut her open. Of course, I consented to have her body harvested for purposes I am still unclear on (though the organ bank keeps sending condolence cards)—the organ bank people played to the optimism of giving life elsewhere. Didion said yes to the autopsy—she had much more wisdom than I did. I couldn't imagine anyone cutting her, corpse or not.

They told us not to touch her when we finally convinced the hospital to let us see her corpse—she'd been dead for fifteen hours and they were concerned that she might be too “distressed,” a notion that made me laugh “inappropriately,” according to the hospital

staffer. My performance in those first days of mourning was the stuff that wins Daytime Emmys: flinging myself on a patch of dust in the driveway and howling that no one would let me see my mother; belittling a Wal-Mart staffer for not allowing us to copy a 20 year old picture (using the clichéd 1950s witch-hunt language of indecency, no less); collapsing in the Big-and-Tall denim section of the same Wal-Mart. The trick to camp, of course, is that you are fully serious in the moment, and my stages of mourning certainly carried a lot of campy baggage. Some peripheral family felt that there was something operatic or simulated about my performance, but it was entirely real (as in not imitated or parodic; Baudrillard has made this point clear when he notes that “pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false,’ the ‘real’ and the imaginary” (3)). A friend had emailed me earlier in the semester that teaching was not a substitute for therapy; he was partially right, since it was not the teaching alone that was vitiating and palliating. It was also the act of writing—the choice to pour my grief and my academic curiosity into these words, into this text. This text is a strong theory (reality) through which my grief has been deployed in constructive, tactile ways (versus the daily “safety valve” emotional explosions of those first days, which weighed into this mid-semester sojourn into melancholy as the work of teaching bore on); like Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Brother*, which witnesses and documents the life and death of her brother, and dissects her horror with unflinching candor, this document is my testimony: to my mother, and to my inquiries into the formation of pedagogy.

October 19, 2006 8:15pm

Today was very busy, and rather emotional. My students have been making very interesting interpretations of *The Thousand and One Nights*—some a bit xenophobic about Muslim attitudes toward women (often the comments have been present tense, not reflecting how many hundred years ago this work was composed). We covered travel writings in class today, using Stephen Greenblatt's comment, "The authors . . . were liars—few of them *steady* liars, as it were, like Mandeville, but frequent and cunning liars none the less, whose position virtually required the strategic manipulation and distortion and outright suppression of the truth," to start discussion of Mandeville, Christopher Columbus, Cortez, da Mosta, Diaz, Staden, and John Smith. As they've explored what it means to lie in your observations of "natives," they've had to explore some of the xenophobic feelings that were expressed in discussion of *The Thousand and One Nights* as well as think about "sacred cows" like Columbus (whose holiday is still a day off at John Jay) as potentially fallible narrators. Work on the discussion board has been slow, but Bree referred to Columbus as a "murderous liar," which was echoed by comments by Marley later, while Donna felt Columbus was "honoring Christianity" and hardly a liar. That there was no fractious debate makes me feel I've not stirred the pot enough.

I had a short conversation with Chris that made me feel even more dazed about death, and mourning. He told me he'd been thinking of me today, and was glad I stopped by. In our talk, he let me know he had no regrets about the end, as even in his last, long talk with his mother, they'd discussed her mortality, and covered a lot of issues he'd wanted to ask her about. One refracted for me—a question he asked his mother about the past

that she confirmed, as it was a question my mother always refused to answer me about, including in the long conversations we had a few weeks before her death, alone near the pond. His mother knew her time had come, and she'd seen all the members of her family before her death. Strangely, my mother, whose death was utterly sudden, also had seen all of us the day she died (save my brother across the Atlantic, whom she'd seen six weeks prior). It was a strange symmetry given the other dissimilarities. I told Chris that I wouldn't dare tell him that I knew what he was going through, or tell him how he was going to feel. I think I've learned from so many people insisting those things to me that while some aspects are universal, most are esoteric and unique. While I offered the sympathy I had available, I readily admit that the issue became about me, and that a certain concomitant shame became attached in seeing and speaking to Chris—that somehow I was hijacking his mourning into my own.

Despite the growing sense I have that my composition students would like to pillory me, or gaybash me, for that matter, I endeavored again today to regain some of their confidence. One step was taken in returning their compare-and-contrast papers to them. The papers were hardly masterful, but the session I held with them on the structure and content of such papers seemed to be reproduced intact in many papers. The worst of the lot merely reproduced, with not more cohesion or expansion, my notes on the board about the two articles. The best actually took a stance and even moved slightly away from my question to respond to their own concerns. The bulk were in between—largely derivative of the class notes, but with glimmers of good intention. In handwriting class in the third grade, we were made to repeat cursive over and over, with the hopes that it would

emblazon into our fingers and brains alike the “correct” ways of writing. I hope that this exercise has done similar work.

I did not put grades on their papers, but I did offer students an opportunity, during free-writing, to come and ask me about my comments and to get a “range of grades.” Many of the papers were given generous B-range grades, and the students who fell below that were not in the group that came up. Melanie was first, apprehensive and cautious, but beaming ear-to-ear when I told her about her B. Once that smile moved around the room, others followed. Marybeth was disappointed in her “low A” but then she also has ambitions that put her ahead of many of her classmates. Martika was ecstatic over her B—she has truly developed a sense of purpose in these last weeks—even asking today for a Writing Center referral! The wave of optimism moved over the room, and when I told them at the end of class that I felt that many of them were making improvements in their writing, and that these papers showed it, I felt a wave of actually believing my own words. I certainly think they did, and hope to get more work turned in when I collect next week.

Each of my literature classes has a paper due on Tuesday, and so many questions to me today centered on my “expectations.” I think it disorients many of them when I am blasé about that aspect—I focus more on students expressing a point-of-view, and less on a pat, trite “answer.” I expect a variety of creative work from my medieval/early modernists, as that is the assignment. I expect waves of desperation from my otherwise delightful classics students, as many of them have not been doing the two-to-three page response

papers (I require five of nine to be done—we are approaching the fifth paper, and some have only done the first, required paper on *Gilgamesh*). I've already warned them that the end of the semester is fast approaching, and that it will be difficult to produce quality papers on a weekly basis to catch up. I expect to see the bulk of the class turn in on *Antigone*, particularly since I covered at length some of the concerns that Seamus Heaney brings to his translation, *Burial at Thebes*, which is being covered on Tuesday and is one of the two topics—comparing the adaptation concerns of Heaney to a traditional translation. I even directed them to Skidmore's delightful site on the Heaney work, with many essays that discuss his concerns on justice and the role of women, as well as anachronistic takes on queer theory and Creon's psychology. I hope they take the hints, as I have thoroughly enjoyed this class—and its enthusiastic embrace of my conception of this course—and do not want to be grading them down because they do not meet the writing requirements. Given that there is neither midterm nor final, I don't understand why they'd feel overburdened—I can only suspect it is a touch of laziness, which perhaps I am suborning by encouraging free flow in their group work.

October 20, 2006 9:15pm

Today was my brother's 25th birthday. I chatted with him for twenty minutes today—no small feat given how busy we both have been. Even larger, neither of us mentioned Mom, somehow, nor the ugliness of dealing with her estate. I am working again at the Graduate Center, pouring wine. Today I made nice conversation with a first-year who is working with me now at pouring wine and cutting bread for consumption by rabidly hungry academics (today, Victorians). I gave advice; I listened to complaints about

underperforming students. I did for her what many did for me when I was in her shoes. I had no desire to do any of it, mind you—I still find myself largely eschewing social events in favor of working—of documenting for this journal, or planning classes, or working on my upcoming orals examination. I am basically a hermit—a hermit performing six classes a week, with a plastered smile. I just wish I felt less mummified.

October 24, 2006 12:15pm

My medieval and early modern students have largely flown under the radar this semester, but they are doing smart, interesting work that shows many valences for reading in the Middle Ages. I've just graded papers they turned in with the assignment:

“In producing *The Penelopiad*, Margaret Atwood set out not to rewrite *The Odyssey* but rather to create a companion piece that adds new voices to the text. In this paper, you will have that opportunity, too. In 3-5 pages, you will adapt one of these texts, exposing your authorial concerns to the core characters, plot, and themes of the original author: *Beowulf*, *The Decameron* (choose one story), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Canterbury Tales* (choose one tale), *The Thousand and One Nights* (choose one story). Your grade will depend on your creativity, your attention to the characters, themes, and plots of the source material, and the execution of your writing. You may choose to convert the text to a standard narrative, or you may choose to adapt scenes in the style of a play or film.”

They've surprised me with their creativity and their attention to the concerns of their respective texts. Multiple students retold *Sir Gawain* from the point-of-view of Lady Bertilak, and many students attended to "The Miller's Tale" (from *The Canterbury Tales*) with a variety of takes, often ribald. Antalya tells a soap opera-esque tale of the Wife of Bath's husbands, set in modern-day Queens, with lots of blood and money lust alike. Two writers—Chilli and Naman—endeavored to make George Bush their (anti-) heroes, in reworkings of *The Thousand and One Nights* ("A Thousand and One Invasions") and *Beowulf*. Jacob retells *Beowulf* as a slasher pic.

Donna tells the tale of Grendel's mother in aching detail, capturing a rich inner psychology: "I was upset at myself because I had failed to avenge my son's death. I felt worthless to know that once again these men had defeated us, my family."

Vladimir makes a point-by-point comparison of Superman and Beowulf, culminating in dividing their lives into trials, life, and heroic death. Frank largely keeps *Beowulf* the same, but argues that the title character is sexually interested in men, culminating in a wildly funny erotic fruition: "Since he couldn't have Grendel in the way he intended he brought it among himself to feel the pain and ecstasy he had when he hurt him, Grendel's scream was symbolic for an orgasm in which Beowulf had and it transmigrated to Grendel in which Beowulf enjoyed." [Sic]

Alistair retitles his version of "The Miller's Tale" with his last name instead, establishing a firm authorial hand on his modern retelling that involves immigration to the United

States, attention to female sexual actuation (“When they made love, Susana felt happier than she had ever been.”), and a plot involving the IRS! Such fun!

Jane tells the tale of Shahrayar’s wife with erotic abandon, relating florid tales of illicit sexual romps: “I observe a black slave. As he works in the blazing sun, I trace his muscles under his dark, glistening skin that run from his arms down to his back; some one pulls me in and holds me in and says in a desperate manner ‘I want to make love to you.’” Denise’s work is desexualized—a reworking of “The Tale of the Ox and the Donkey” that is set in a modern, impersonal workplace, among worker bees.

Patrick tells the “prequel” to *Sir Gawain*, in which the titular hero “dreams” the events at Arthur’s banquet, culminating in Arthur’s death when no one takes the Green Knight’s challenge. This emboldens Gawain to protect Arthur when the “real” event happens and adds motivation to the beginning of the text. Angela retells the tale in the modern day, with Donald Trump, Paris Hilton, Greg and Peter Brady appearing (along with Peter’s girlfriend/sister, Marcia). As wacky as this seems, she manages to work the characters through the plot efficiently and with logical rationales that link the Dark Age antecedents to fresh 21st century mores (reading the denouement where it is explained that Paris’s sister, Nicky, is actually “Marsha,” hoping to ensnare Greg in a sex scandal, is worth reading ten plagiarized papers).

Even the “misses” have some intrigue to them. Edina misinterpreted the assignment, choosing to analyze the text while also positing: “what if” Grendel and his mom are

simply “differently-bodied” humans, who’ve been put upon and terrorized for not conforming? Antonia retold the prologue to *The Thousand and One Nights* “speaking from Shahrazad’s prospective” [sic], but she simply used the first person and literally told the plot over again, with certain 21st century-isms (“If King Shahrayar was able to sexually satisfy his wife, maybe she would not have gone elsewhere seeking pleasure from another man”). Marva made the same error in retelling *Sir Gawain* through the eyes of the Green Knight, but neither changing any details nor offering an inner voice to this crucial character.

The most astonishing paper was Cassandra’s retelling of *Sir Gawain* as a love poem for the unrequited gay man, Bertilak, in modern New York City. She opens: “Winter has come once again and the city is bare. No singing birds to wake me up in the morning or the brisk breeze of fall to caress my hair. I feel sad again, and the harshness of winter does not help... Please do not get me wrong when I say that the playfulness of my wife at night is not unfulfilling, it just does not meet this desire I have for men.” As she unfolds the events of *Sir Gawain* in the modern city, with a lonely, piteous narrator, your heart breaks for a man so desperate for a man’s touch.

I am teaching a piece on “the down low” today in composition, and part of me wants to copy this paper and bring it, as an example of the sadness that can blossom in any person whose most basic needs are unfulfilled. It’s a truly astonishing work of creative juice, one that reaffirms my belief that creative assignments can yield the strangest, most exhilarating blossoms.

Comment

It's important to give credit where credit is due, and much of the inspiration for this assignment derived not just from tenets of composition theory but also from my reading of Carolyn Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval*, in which she creates her own queer matrix of identifications between medieval and modern texts. In wanting to make disparate texts interact (across issues of temporality, space, genre, and un/reality), she creates possibilities for personalized visions of the Middle Ages with polyvalent sexualities. Her citation of Robert Glück's, novel *Margery Kempe*, in which a modern gay man is obsessed with Margery in much the same way that medieval Margery is obsessed with Christ and the Virgin Mary, demonstrates the possibilities for queer identifications (even with non-queer subject positions, like the majority of my students). The influence of Butler (and the ideas of performing gender and sexuality) permeates my own classroom, along with Dinshaw's work, which I find so performative and influential in how I devise modern approaches to teaching the medieval.

October 24, 2006 9:00pm

As successful as the first class was today, the last two have been bittersweet. There were very few papers today on *Antigone*, and many of the ones that were turned in weren't successful. The topic that caused much of the consternation *seemed* easy: "Why has Heaney called his adaptation *Burial at Thebes*? Explain your perspectives on how death and burial are important themes in Heaney's adaptation, and consider the importance of grief as you interpret *Antigone* for yourself." Yet, so few seemed to be able to make the

comparisons and contrasts necessary—in a class where we have focused too much on issues of adaptation and translation, and the subject positions that go into our consideration of each, it startles me that so few could make necessary connections. I'm taking it a bit personally.

Today should have been a blockbuster day with the composition crowd—we were reading Benoit Denizet-Lewis's landmark piece about the “Down Low”: the secret society of signs and whispers regarding black men and gay sex without explicitly gay identity. The group work I assigned was to develop lists of characteristics that described the following intersections: black + straight; white + straight; black + gay; white + gay. With a free write on “secret” and then consideration of what “secret life” means, I expected some fire. Alas, I don't think the room is comfortable enough being fiery, as the groups were hesitant to be controversial. Marius, Antwan, Dylan, Dodi, and Oscar ended up with black + gay, but seemed so overdetermined to not be offensive that they ended up with a meager list (including “feminine” and “oppressed”). They genuinely worked on it, too—which is a huge improvement over earlier in the semester, but not in terms of interesting me with their output. The class as a whole seemed to not gather the iterations of the “+”—that subject positions are aggregates of plusses in your identity formation, and that the DL reflects a particular position: black men expressing that “being gay” is a “white thing.”

I still feel that I've turned a corner with them—that there is more trust on both sides—but I've yet to spur their creative output. I have failed in developing for them a holding

environment where play can be provocatively expressed. I feel rather demoralized that I am not creating that space, and I can only hope that the upcoming conferences help create that vibe.

Comment

Race is, of course, a sensitive topic when a white male professor addresses it as part of the construction of subject position (particular when a diversity of race and class is a significant part of his urban classroom). In my classes in this semester, the racial makeup was always a diverse blend, with no particular majority, but pluralities of Dominican, African-American, and Haitian students, along with blocs of Eastern Europeans (though not necessarily from the same nations). The issue of shame is particularly fraught and increasingly divisive—I've presented papers at conferences about the issues of shame reparation that gay men do to overcome traumas (particularly endemic in childhood). I've come to feel quite demonized by Judith Halberstam's work in "Shame and White Gay Masculinity." Halberstam characterizes her reaction to a "Gay Shame" conference at the University of Michigan as being convinced that "gay shame, if used in an uncritical way, was for, by, and about the white gay men who had rejected feminism and a queer of color critique and for whom, therefore, shame was still an active rubric of identification" (Halberstam 219). If you read on looking for an explanation on how she conflates white gay men and shame in contrast with feminism and queer of color critique, you won't find it. This ungrounded charge kicks off a litany of sins against white gay men that are not clarified: being white and not writing about race and gender is "a narrow interest in the self [that] can only be termed *identity politics*" (220, emphasis hers). That the same

charge is not leveled against women and people of color who do not write about race and gender is itself, to use Halberstam's term, identity politics. However, she doesn't make that distinction. She claims that "the future of queer studies...depends absolutely on moving away from white gay male identity politics" without ever quite explaining what is so demonic about being white or gay (220). Halberstam invests in making shame a weapon against privilege (which she specifies is "whiteness, masculinity, wealth") without a whiff of irony in using a tactic long deployed by the Religious Right as a heteronormative interpellative tool as a way of attacking members of her own community for the sins of not sharing her agenda. Her dramatic misreading of Pedro Almodovar's controversial *Talk to Her* underscores her grandiosity. She assigns to a main character (a Spanish male) "hinted" gayness that is imperceptible (she can't elucidate any examples of this purported "gayness"), then describes the ways in which, by this character committing rape (treated as an "act of love" by the text of the film), it exemplifies gay white male shame. Seeking to turn the gay white male into a metaphoric rapist, she converts a Spanish heterosexual film character into a gay white male (real) subject. That she and I agree that the character commits rape is all the more damning to Halberstam, who never allows for the possibility that a gay white male can share feminist concerns (although her footnotes generously laud George Chauncey for discussing race politics, thereby indemnifying him from her excoriation). It's inflammatory to assert that all LGBT shame is gay white male; it's downright disgusting to assert that it manifests as heterosexual rape. Halberstam might as well ask the American Family Association to be put on the payroll—her psychologizing is certainly on par with any grandiose psycho-medico babble they press release and far more damaging considering her lesbian subject position

and estimable occupation as Professor of English at USC. Halberstam's solution—to distance the movement from gay white male shame—indicates a foundational fissure profound and baffling.

Maia Ettinger's "Pocahontas Paradigm" points us positively towards ways of expressing the inner conflict of our subject position (anyone who has ever had to choose between a GLQ or race-based area meeting at a conference understands this competition) without indulging in "blame" games. Multiple essays in Keith Gilyard's collection *Race, Rhetoric, and Composition* point us in constructive ways towards identity recognition in the classroom that is empowering to our students—regardless of the racial makeup of the professor. Gilyard's own essay points us to the history of race in composition, and demands that we free ourselves of any racialized baggage that has moved transhistorically into today's classroom. David Holmes' "Fighting Back by Writing Black" points us to our students' right to their own language—an absolutely crucial pedagogical point to my classroom, where students are encouraged strongly to develop their own perspectives and voices. Amy Goodburn's "Racing (Erasing) White Privilege in Teacher/Research Writing About Race" implores all professors to take ownership not only of differing races in our writing, but of our own (white) race as well. Given the complexities of student privacy and IRBs, it is not always acceptable to fully develop the "bodies" of our students in our writing, but it is significant that we own our representations of our own bodies, at the very least. The community building and attempts to create ameliorative steps represented in this volume help to provide direction to me when I am feeling battered by the divisive unpleasanties hurled by Halberstam.

October 26, 2006 9:46am

My early modernists continue to shine with bright, witty papers and presentations on Petrarch and his immediate descendents. Tuesday's presentations were focused on Petrarch, with today's selection from Michelangelo, Sceve, Wyatt, Spenser, Shakespeare, and Marino. Each student is expected to generate a 500-750 word explanation of the poem—with the freedom to focus on specific explication or broader cultural or biographical meanings. They then must present their papers in a 5-10 minute talk, including time for question and answer (usually from me).

Some presentations are confident yet comical—Naman, for instance, misreads Berni's "Hair of Fine Silver, Shaggy and Twisted" as a love ode to a much older lady (despite the book footnoting that Berni is parodying Petrarch). His misreading is still instructive to the class, though—as testimony to the power of confident reading when dealing with poetry, even when the reading is demonstrably and factually incorrect. Bree is a bit ragged in her presentation, which she appears to be improvising on the fly, but it is one of the best—her passionate reading of "My Galley Charged with Forgetfulness" (Thomas Wyatt's reworking of Petrarch's Sonnet 189) is smart—taking us through the explication process literally while giving the presentation. The accompanying paper was woefully unprepared, but the presentation was thrillingly "in the moment," in the ways that Vladimir's well-prepared but monotone work on Spenser's *Amoretti* 37 was not. Students like Jama and Vondi gave smart, literate readings of Petrarchan sonnets—but you'd never have known it by their presentations, full of diffidence and shallow voice.

One student who put it all together was Denise—already one of the spark plugs in class, she delivered a passionate reading of Petrarch’s Sonnet 61, then delivered a competent paper that covered Petrarchan biography and an explication of the poem that was satisfactory to me and accessible to her classmates. She threw down Tuesday’s early gauntlet. Today, Nicholas—a student with multiple absences who did not turn in his paper for Tuesday—startled me with a lively and sharply written analysis of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130. I was at first skeptical he’d written it; during question and answer, I opened by asking him what the Holy See is, since he’d mentioned it in the presentation. Not only did he respond with “the Vatican,” but he launched extemporaneously into a discussion of its relevance. This student has totally snuck under my radar this semester—he is able to write a line (that Google confirms wasn’t taken from someplace else) as sophisticated as this: “The entire mentality of change towards a humanistic frame of mind would certainly prompt this type of work to be written and at the same token, create a boldness to challenge the norms of a bygone era where the Holy See of Rome held total sway over what was allowed to be published.” I have already initiated email contact to find out why his paper is late—he told me earlier that he works as a real estate paralegal and that his five absences are the consequence of his being in court, which he can document. He also told me that he has obtained class notes from Cassandra (who is shining this semester and I suspect takes good notes, since she actually appears to be listening at every class session), so I have hopes for him. This is one student I can’t consider derelict, but need to work with his limitations to maximize his possibilities.

Email has provided some comical and mock-serious moments in the past few days.

Students have provided baffling and outrageous via this technology—in lieu of actually facing me at my lonely office hours.

Franco, a student in my early modern class, doesn't like to show up. In fact, he doesn't like to read, either—as evidenced by a quiz average of 12 this semester (when he showed up). Two weeks ago, Franco sent me an email of peculiar quality:

This is Franco [deleted] from your morning class on Tuesday's and Thursday's. I needed to send you this email to bring you up to speed with my current absence issues. Now I know im only allowed 4 absences or I will fail but I was hoping you could understand my situation. I have been experiencing really bad sleep insomnia and huge amounts of anxiety. Why, I do not know, but I am trying my hardest to work through it. Your class isn't the only one I have been missing, so im having a really hard time keeping up. Im begging you to please bare with me and to not fail me. Give me a chance to catch up. It is still early in the semester so i have plenty of time to catch up on work. I have been keeping in touch with a few people in class so i dont fall too far behind. Thankyou for listening and I really appreciate your patience. [sic]

This use of email irks me to no end—avoiding eye contact and using email to justify not showing up to class, as if it holds harmless his responsibilities to himself and to the syllabus. Naturally, he hasn't shown since (and he hasn't turned in his first paper or done his oral presentation—which adds up to 25% of his grade). So, this morning, in spite of myself, I responded:

Franco: Since you haven't come to class since you wrote this, I haven't had a chance to discuss it in person, which is the preferable way to address this. I'd strongly advise you visit me sometime before 2pm today, or on Tuesday between noon and four to discuss your options in this class. My office is 1258 North Hall.

I can't imagine I'll see him anytime soon.

Another student in that class, Evie, did not attend Tuesday's class. She emailed me that morning:

Prof. Faunce I'm unable to attend class today due to death in my family. My grandmother passed away about 4:00 A.M. due to complications from a severe stroke. I have all the work that was due for today and I will send it to you this afternoon via e-mail, I hope that is o.k. with you.

Well, she didn't send that follow-up email with the work, of course. In fact, the whole thing sounded fishy to me—if my grandmother just died, I either wouldn't be continuing to work or, if I was actually done, I would have sent the paper in that initial email. I am sensitive to grandparent issues since two of mine died in my first six weeks of college in 1993—and I wish someone had told me to withdraw that semester and start from scratch. I didn't, and I did abysmally (including a near-failure in an economics class in which the professor openly accused me of lying about the deaths—despite me producing prayer cards and obituaries that *named me* as surviving each of my grandparents). I've always been sensitive to letting young students—my students—know that there's no shame in

withdrawal (particularly for grief, which I understand keenly this semester). I am always a bit ashamed when I suspect a student is lying—especially about deaths this big.

I responded to Evie:

Bring me a paper copy on Thursday as well. So sorry to hear of your loss.

Today she responded to me, and I am puzzled:

I e-mailed my paper to you yesterday and I hope it is what you mean by a comparison piece. I'm not going to be in class tomorrow because my grandmother's waite is in the morning. So i'll bring the hard copy in on Tuesday [sic]

Since this assignment was hardly a comparison piece, and since I never got a paper from her, I'm stumped. I'm also in a quandary because she missed her oral presentation today. So, I am taking a harder line than I would like to. My response:

I did not receive any documents from you in the last two days. Also, you missed your oral presentation on your Michelangelo poem this morning. I'd suggest you email me those two documents upon receipt of this email. Assuming I see the documents and you can document your grandmother's passing, I'll assign no late penalty to each work, and let you give your presentation on Tuesday, November 7 (our next class).

I do hope she can put my suspicions to bed.

One final, humorous email came from Jane—also from that class. Another student, Suzanne, was falling asleep quite regularly during our first set of Petrarch presentations on Tuesday, and Jane noticed me agape at the sleeper, who would awake each time we applauded a finished presentation, then return to her slumber. Her message:

I couldnt help it, I just had to get it off my chest!!!... I saw you looking at the girl sitting next to you. She was sleeping and snoring and you were looking at her funny!! like "what the hell?" LOL.... then when each person finished she woke up and started clapping like she was paying attention!!!! again ...I just had to get it off my chest....sorry....I was laughing to myself in class.... have a nice day :)

Her comment made me laugh aloud, but I am also loathe to “keep secrets” among students, especially secrets that concern other students. So my response was terse and compromising:

It was very funny, wasn't it? Good of us to keep it to ourselves, though.

This is definitely a time that brings out the best and worst in students, and the lack of eye contact in email suborns it.

Comment

I am a firm believer that email should supplement, not replace, face time (whether after class or at office hours). Email provides opportunities for questions to be asked about assignments, but also for moments that border on the inappropriate (such as gossiping) or

opportunities to tell tall tales about absence issues (and more often than not, in my experience, an excuse delivered via email is dubious).

October 30, 2006 2:47pm

I am on an unmitigated rollercoaster of emotional ambivalence this afternoon. Just after noon (9:00am Pacific), I got a call from Glenn of *Jeopardy!* informing me that I have been selected as a contestant—taping the week after Thanksgiving. Throughout the exciting phone call, I could only think of my students—how does this affect my teaching schedule? I called my boyfriend to share the news, but got his voicemail. I called my mother to tell her that all those years of shuttling me to tryouts for the Teen Tournament (only to not get “the callback”) had finally paid dividends. When the “new-non-Mom” picked up her work extension, the gales of tears were not far behind the quick hang-up. I am euphoric. I am despondent. My mother would have loved to see it—win or lose. When I was a teenager, and appearing on local public television in school quiz shows, she was never late, never absent from any of my tapings—in fact, perhaps the only known celluloid of her is in the audience on those videos. So, I am a bit ragged emotionally right now, and though I should be preparing for my conferences tomorrow, I am quite trapped by my memories of my mother and her hopes for me to appear on *Jeopardy!* Four times in my teens I was chaperoned to a testing site, hoping to make the cut as a contestant in their Teen Tournament. Four times I waited for a phone call that would secure my position, and fly me and my sparring parents to Los Angeles, where stars lived. It never happened. I’m wracked with my grief, again, wishing my mother could hear my news.

Midterm Conferences and IRB Review

Preparing for the mid-term conference is not much different than the teaching of a text or the moderation of a writing classroom: know your texts, be confident, and speak deliberately and with attention to your goals. My goals in the conference—similar to my stated pedagogical goals in the classroom—are to engage my students and consider “solutions” to their “problems.” Thirty years ago, Rosemarie Arbur likened the conference to the social worker’s “interview” and outlined similar goals for developing the relationship with each student as one in which the professor is a participant in a problem-identification and subsequent solution. Jacobs and Karliner warn the professor to be sure not to dominate the discussion—allow the students to participate fully and willingly in the identification of problem areas and devising solutions. Of course, this is in sync with my stated, non-demagogic teaching practices. Indeed, my ideas on teaching flow from and toward these baseline texts—when Donald Murray identifies that he treats his conferences much as he teaches the writing process, I see my own process of questioning and refocusing my students (both on the page and in person). The conference is a vital opportunity to look each student in the eye and develop the already established relationship of writers—one paid to teach, one paying to learn, both fully engaged in the process of teaching and learning from each other. When it goes “right,” the writing conference can be a downright utopian experience.

Of course, any utopian moments are ephemeral, and there are moments of sadness and regret as well. How I report on the conferences in my classes this year is predicated on the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of my home institution. As a

member of the academy in the humanities, worries about the ethical treatment of subjects don't immediately jump out as a primary concern, but it is nonetheless one increasingly faced by writers who consider their students in their texts. Berman and Kleinsasser have proposed nine principles to guide use of student work in classroom inquiry—including strongly advocating for informed consent, despite the power dynamics inherent in such a moment of request and assent. Cathy Davidson considered issues of privacy in composing *36 Views of Mt. Fuji* when she decided to create composite characters—fusing multiple real people into fewer discrete identities while still reporting “true” events. The choices we make in how we represent our students in our work are still, despite guidelines and articles to assist us, largely esoteric, and situation-specific.

I applied for IRB approval mid-semester (just after these conferences), after completing a 3-hour on-line workshop designed to educate graduate students on using human subjects in research. I applied for “exempt” status (a streamlined review process for less complicated research studies) under the classification “research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices.” I disclosed the nature of the project, the nature of the references to living persons, the “harms and benefits” to subjects, the processes for maintaining anonymity of the subjects, the processes of consent, and a final justification. I approached the 7-page (plus appendices) document with appropriate trepidation, as Heidi McKee has discussed in her review of IRB compliance: the dominant medical paradigms of the questions (and implicitly of the review process) are troublesome to the non-medical respondent.

My work was neither approved nor rejected by the IRB of my home institution. In a moment worthy of farce (or consistent with the unpredictable nature of the semester in question), the application was “misplaced” for a few months by the IRB administrator, and then summarily unconsidered by the IRB (once I inquired about the delay in getting an answer) because “the research had already taken place” by the time they found the application. I appealed to the Provost for intercession, and the Provost, unable to compel the IRB to even read my application by this point, granted me a waiver from institutional IRB approval. So, this work is institutionally approved vis-à-vis the ethics of its research, but without the sanction of a “proper” vetting by an IRB. In its stead is my own statement of purpose regarding student likenesses and the IRB era.

It would be inappropriate to use florid, descriptive language to describe each student conference: describing a student as Latina, or African-American, or Lithuanian may provide the reader with more a more vivid picture but it also risks the student’s privacy. I’ve eschewed such descriptions, and gone further in avoiding discussing the specifics of personal disclosures in association with any student—here, or in the narrative itself. This means, for instance, that the two students who confided to me that they were pregnant will not be associated with their pseudonym, their performance in class or in this conference, or any other way, except in *this* disembodied moment (in keeping with dissociated responses, I encouraged both students to use our school’s confidential Counseling department to discuss the concerns each had about her pregnancy, while utterly avoiding giving any of the advice each was asking for). It is ethically necessary to use our personal judgment on whether to disclose the nature of our writing, and putting

students on notice that they are essentially being recorded for posterity. I made a conscious decision not to upset the class via the observer principle (the notion that anyone under observation will necessarily change his/her behavior because of the very act of being observed). After reading Berman and Kleinsasser, and considering conversations on this topic that have sprouted informally, I would have added blanket consent forms to the syllabus, asking the students for permission to reproduce their likenesses and work in any future research. In this project, there was no harm, no reward, no risk to my students, or any human “subjects,” by my records. This project is ultimately autobiographical and esoteric—no amount of research and analysis can undermine the personal elements each of us brings to our writing. This research is meant not to interfere with the basic work of the classroom: students are there to be educated by me, not to be documented with Capote-like, unflinching exactitude.

As a result, these paragraphs will detail my experiences with midterm conferences in broad strokes—addressing some of the issues endemic to conferencing and to dealing with a multicultural student population, while discussing some students more specifically than others (a decision made so as to not burden the text with 53 descriptions of conferences by emphasizing recurring themes and underscoring the significant moments in learning and writing processes encountered in these conferences).

The conferences were scheduled for two of my three classes: the composition class, and the writing-enhanced classics class. I did not schedule conferences with the medieval/early modern class since their class was not heavily invested in writing

processes as part of their grading. Students were asked to sign up for a twenty-minute block—three were scheduled for each block, with admittance to my office in order of arrival. This process, which yielded conferences of 5-15 minutes per student, allows for orderly disposition of the appointments: one student being twenty minutes late will not hold up the process, since other students are also scheduled for the same time, and being late simply puts you in a queue. At its peak slow period, a student waited 30 minutes past her scheduled appointment time to see me. By the end of each day (conferences were scheduled for 3 hours on a Thursday, and 5 hours for the following Tuesday), we were back on schedule (since no-shows tend to help us play catch-up!). I note the time of arrival for each student on my note sheet (this helps prevent a student from claiming s/he “showed up” when s/he did not—which has happened, despite the absurdity of trying to convince a professor that he had a conversation with you that never happened). I tend to have a “cheat sheet” prepared for each day’s panel (name, number of absences, any noteworthy issues—a particularly laudable or flawed paper, for instance, or a lack of turned-in work) so that I can quickly lead with a topic to open discussion—if the student doesn’t do it himself. Aliah, the first student on the first day, was ready to discuss her portfolio (which all students were expected to bring, containing all completed work to-date) without prompting. She was eager to be praised—and I did so, trying to instill confidence in her improved writing as well as her obvious recalibration of attitude. Her big smile gave me the will to trudge through an uneven first day: for every Arnold, with his perfect attendance, strong work ethic, and polite reverence, there was an Orlando, who did not want to discuss how to improve his unpolished drafts but was more interested in demanding a “good grade,” despite the massive illogic of such a request in

light of my attempts to converse with him. Rather than dominate our time together by pointing out how his work did not warrant a “good grade,” I tried to elicit a plan for how to earn his good grade. As Yoda said, there is no try, only do, and I fear my attempts with students like Orlando were largely unsuccessful.

Attitude problems are often addressed directly in my conferences. Marybeth, who consistently has not turned in work despite being an active interlocutor in class, did not bring her portfolio, admitting that she “got away with it in high school.” A delightful student, Marybeth got an earful about needing to recalibrate her attitude for the expectations of college. Marjane came in without her work and with a smug relish in her lack of preparation. I was direct that her attitude would affect her grade—if her absences and disruptive in-class behavior didn’t do her in first. In both cases, I’d tried gentle persuasion before the conference—whether a word after class, or a note on a paper. Fixing an attitude problem often takes direct comment—even if it isn’t going to be rectified by the student, it lets him/her know that you are aware, and willing to dole out consequences.

Multiple students were no-shows on day one, but showed up on the second day, which clogged the process, but did not sink it, thanks to the timing device. The sick grandparent recurred many times on this day—as I have mentioned before, I am rather sensitive to sick/dying grandparents, since two of mine died in my first semester in college. I am also sensitive that I wish someone had suggested withdrawing that semester, rather than performing as poorly as I did in the haze of mourning at age 18. Part of the scheduling

mandate for mid-term conferences is to hold them in the week before the university's deadline to withdraw without academic penalty. I advised many students to withdraw throughout the days of these conferences for a variety of reasons: exceeding the maximum absences (an automatic F), likelihood of not passing (usually for not turning in work, or for not showing improvement from an original writing assessment of below passing), emotional distress resulting in diminished performance in the class. All such advice emanates out of process-based learning: we will work together if the student continues in the class to try and achieve a positive result, but without guarantees on my part. Often I ask students to draw up a contract between us detailing what they will do (and the whens and hows) in order to achieve the grade they desire. This is particularly useful with "solid B" students who are dogged in their assertions that they "deserve" an A. Allowing students to design their own contracts allows us all to be active participants in improving their performance—even if my motivation is improved writing, and so often theirs is a better grade. Still, the conferences in which withdrawal came up often resulted in me noting a variation of the following: "sad expression, lots of pleading/begging, averting gaze, diffident."

Another recurring theme on day two was plagiarism. Arthur and I had a frank conversation about his plagiarism, and my disdain for the deed. He kept emphasizing that there was a health issue in his family, and I kept responding that there is never a justification for cheating. It was not a fruitful exchange, since we both seemed quite frustrated by the time he left. The larger plagiarism situation emanated from Antwan: he and Tommy turned in papers before the mid-term conference that were essentially the

same (one was longer and more esoterically written in Antwan's style, and the other was a paraphrase of each paragraph, lacking sources and style but maintaining the exact arguments and organization of what I presume was Antwan's paper). I showed the papers to two colleagues, who immediately noted the obvious similarities. Since Antwan missed his conference on day one, I was forced to discuss the issue with Tommy. Tommy denied it at first; presented with the papers, he admitted they worked together. Read identical sentences (with occasional word substitutions that didn't affect meaning), he reassured me that it was a "simple misunderstanding." I tried to make a deal—appealing to what I hoped would be Tommy's sense of honor, I told him that both papers would fail, and indeed both students would fail the semester, per the syllabus, for plagiarism, unless I received a confession about the nature of this plagiarism. If, as I suspected, Tommy had copied Antwan's work, and they admitted to this, I would be lenient with Antwan. What I hoped Tommy would read between the lines: "In other words, Tommy, you are failing either way. Admit what you did, and your friend, who stupidly helped you commit such a stupid, easily caught act of cheating, will live to redeem himself." Tommy left, without a confession. An hour later, Antwan turned up, full of apologies, but refusing to admit Tommy copied his work. In his eyes I could see the guilt, the misplaced sense of loyalty to his friend, and the realization that he'd irrevocably damaged his academic career. When I mentioned, in tandem with this, my suspicion that he was also responsible for Janie's "sudden literacy" (Janie, who was unable to string two coherent sentences together, oral or otherwise, all semester, and who had not gone to required tutorial sessions at the Writing Center, had suddenly turned in two well-structured and executed papers, bearing some of Antwan's characteristic

flourishes and turns of phrase), he blanched even further, admitting he was “helping” Janie. (Janie’s failure for the course was more easily doled out, since she had exceeded the maximum absences, and proving her plagiarism would be far trickier without a confession.) After Antwan left, unwilling or unable to save himself, I took a short break (despite a small line outside my door), because I was emotionally overwhelmed by the folly I was witnessing and unable to prevent. I knew Antwan would not betray his “friends,” and I knew as well that neither Janie nor Tommy would stand up and save Antwan. Rules being rules, I was and am bound to punish each student for acts of academic dishonesty, and while I absolutely wished to be lenient with Antwan for how I perceived his role in the situation, I needed him to take some ownership of his participation. Without such acknowledgement, I would make no exception for him, despite my sadness and frustration over his situation. I see many students in these conferences, and try to create a positive space for our growth as writers and thinkers—a space that can be utopian, even, when it goes well. It doesn’t always go well, and it takes patience and emotional dexterity to maneuver through such moments and such abjection.

Queer & Nondemagogic Pedagogy

What, precisely, does queer pedagogy mean? Much has been written about this significant rhetorical approach, but no one definition has emerged. Reviewing some of the writing on queer pedagogy has helped me to establish my own working set of “talking points”; these are bursts of past work on queer pedagogy that I find useful for explaining what queer pedagogy means (to me) and how it flows into nondemagogic pedagogy (which I will address later in this chapter). Queer pedagogy seeks to interrogate the heteronormative, and encourage disenfranchised and marginalized voices. Helping to establish the notion of the heteronormative, Alan Sinfield has noted that “the prevailing structures produce us, as well as the bigots...unlike ethnic groups, lesbians and gay men are born of the straight community that harasses them” (59)—a crucial understanding that while queer academics may participate in prevailing structures (like universities), we are also as produced by heteronormativity as our students. Deborah Britzman’s seminal “Is There a Queer Pedagogy? Or, Stop Thinking Straight” is useful for seeing the polyvalent uses of the term “queer” in the development of classroom voices and more engaged students. There is distinctive use in purposing queer pedagogy as a developing tool for all voices (minoritized or not); it is a way of refracting the structural power back upon itself by working within its framework, rather than rebelling against it. William Spurlin has said that “queer theory’s investment in political struggle, in the proliferation of social differences, and in the creation of multiple, more participatory spheres of public deliberation is not unrelated to forms of critical pedagogy which do not see the construction of the disciplines and their institutionalized pedagogical delivery as

politically innocent activities as situated within specific relations of power” (10).

Spurlin’s construction of pedagogy as a space within larger paradigms of power and politics connects to Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, who once posited that “pedagogy should not be about the reproduction of identities or their representation, but about world-building, culture making” (62). “Queer,” for these thinkers, represents an opportunity to free teachers and students alike from the limitations of terms like gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc., and to try and defy traditional structures of power endemic in such language (and the consignment to the margins often imbued in it before the 1990s).

“Queer” opens up nontraditional spaces of discourse: In *Tendencies*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick called queer “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excuses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender...aren’t signified monolithically” (8). Jan Cooper has written about her experiences at Oberlin, trying to create a safe space for queer bodies (including her own), a space that Robert McRuer takes and works through alternatives for (including issues of queer disabilities) in “Composing Bodies.” Queer pedagogy allows for all of these spaces and for work like Nishant Shahani’s “Pedagogical Practices and the Reparative Performance of Failure,” which not only analyzes the workings of heteronormativity but thinks about reparative readings (and the performances in the classroom that can perform reparation). Reparative writing interests me; allowing students to do their own reparation, in the ways I also reparate my own body through my writing, is a logical extension of my work; if it also disrupts hegemony, so much the better (an idea that fits with Andrew Parker’s definition that queer theory is “a non gender-specific rubric that

defines itself diacritically not against heterosexuality but against the normative” (20)).

Jonathan Alexander has written that all queer theory in the classroom disrupts straightness—that is to say not to challenge heterosexual subject identity but rather heteronormative assumptions, which he revels in. Alexander’s ideas here work with Susanne Luhmann’s formulations of queer as a disruption of normativity, and queer pedagogy as the stakes of negotiating how we learn and teach, while refusing heteronormative structures (following Britzman).

In his influential *Homos*, Leo Bersani asks if queer is a political term, not an essential one, and much of the theory that has emerged since has defined queer/pedagogy as a political struggle. If the 1990s were about emerging/developing queer theory (after years of identifying and fighting oppression), then the current deployment of such theory in this century and beyond must be personal—it must be esoteric and consistently fighting the interpellation of the heteronormative. Creating political terms that lump groups together as specialty groups to be pandered to or dismissed eliminates the individuality of the subject, which I strongly object to (even within my own community). Queer pedagogy and queer theory are producing exciting new spaces for our own writing, but they must absolutely be considerate of Spurlin and the ways we negotiate institutional power and our own queer bodies. David Wallace’s “Out in the Academy” demonstrates aptly that effective pedagogy and efficacy in the classroom are not dependent on self-disclosure or definition, but certainly are enhanced by such action within the institutions that enclose the classroom. My self-defined sexuality (and its disclosure) may not create a more fruitful space for discourse for a composition class, but my clear pedagogical concerns in

my sexuality can develop powerful political capital within my department or my institution, and the unifying themes of queer pedagogy are not limited to a queer subject in that classroom.

Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner noted in “Sex in Public,” “Queer social practices like sex and theory try to unsettle the garbled but powerful norms supporting that privilege—including the project of normalization that has made heterosexuality hegemonic” (547).

In addition to the resistance to heteronormativity that is crucial to effectively queer pedagogy, this remark usefully articulates the ways that (queer) theory can be (queer) practice, without conflation into (established, often hegemonic) praxis. Resisting the urge toward masterful or hegemonic forms of pedagogy fits into the broad spectrum of queer pedagogy I’ve outlined here, and helps to loosely define what I consider to be largely a definition by absence: the notion of “nondemagogic pedagogy.” Nondemagogic pedagogy is not meant to be inscribed or epochal, which would be counterintuitive. The term is self-explanatory—it is an absence of leading the people, and the trappings of patriarchal terminology, in the development and deployment of pedagogy.

Nondemagogic pedagogy is a term that emanates from the aims of queer pedagogy—hoping to empower and amplify as many voices (particularly those traditionally marginalized or quieted) as possible in the classroom. Practicing nondemagogic pedagogy celebrates interpretation, and avoids the delivery of “right” or “correct” answers from the lectern or the (red) pen; it encourages questioning, particularly when directed at the heteronormativities often brought by students into their thinking and practices in the composition and literature classrooms. Nondemagogic pedagogy follows

on what Jonathan Alexander has said about queer pedagogy disrupting heterosexuality—it is from disruption that discourse is located and created, by questioning, and interrogating the questions, and re-examining all the interrogations, until panoply of subjectivities and perspectives have been given explication and worth. Nondemagogic pedagogy follows on the work of Althusser in drawing attention to Ideological State Apparatuses, and the ways in which we can allow ourselves to be hegemonically dominated by the state (and its corollaries and imitators, which can include professors and universities). It is pedagogy aware of the potential for hegemonic domination, charged with raising consciousness while eschewing any inclination to define that consciousness.

Estelle Freedman's work on small group consciousness-raising informs my regular use of group work across disciplines in my classroom. Freedman's work descends from second-wave feminism, but nonetheless fits the queer pedagogy canon in its steadfast resistance to hegemony and encouragement of student voice development. Rather than explicitly trying to effect personal transformation in my students in assigning groups out of class, groups are used in-class to create a variety of effects—to give more voices opportunities to discuss literary texts, or to allow multiple groups to consider different (assigned) vantage points on the same assignment. Groups can be used to review the lessons of grammar without the stigma of right/wrong emanating from a corrected quiz or a Socratic method for questioning the proper deployment of commas. Groups often provide microcosmic opportunities to do the work of queer pedagogy, as described by Berlant and Warner: world-building, culture making. Groups respond to assignments, but they also

do so on their own terms, esoteric to each group, and begin the process of exploring and interrogating their own worldviews by exploring and interrogating each other's worldviews. Gayle Rubin has asked us, long ago, to start thinking about sex, for all the variety of reasons (political, philosophical, economic, etc.) that go along with thinking about sex. Compelling our students to consider sexuality and gender—oftentimes just by thinking about it, with pleasure, with permission, with institutional encouragement—is effectively accomplished with the consciousness-raising work of small groups, developing the voices queer pedagogy encourages us to embrace.

In English 101, I often teach a variety of short texts on gender and sexuality, organized to build understanding of subjectivity, heteronormativity, and the subject position. Early in that course, I assign Deborah Tannen's "Men and Women Talking on the Job;" there is a one-two page response paper due on the topic at the beginning of class, followed by a free-writing (low stakes) assignment on the word "Aggression." After these ten minutes of free-writing, we discuss the term, and connect some themes to the text: essentialist vs. constructionist understanding of social behaviors, the gendered connotations of certain words (such as bitch or wimp), and connecting this writing with the prior class reading, Deborah Blum's "The Gender Blur," in which I first introduced subject positions in considering how people define themselves, and compile their identities through identifications. I avoid telling students there is anything "right" or "wrong" in their comments—the goal is to observe or interpret, occasionally challenge, and try to provoke continued thought and conversation (sometimes actuated by giving an impromptu in-class writing assignment). This class session is completed with a lengthy (25 minutes) group

work assignment in which each group must compose a paragraph on a term they are randomly assigned (“bitch,” “wimp,” “assertive,” and “aggressive”); this paragraph must include some evidence from the Tannen text, which gives me an opportunity to comment on how they use and analyze evidence in a low-stakes in-class setting. They then recite their paragraphs for the class, allowing for conversation to emerge on how each term connects to the text, and to each other’s paragraphs. I don’t bring an agenda to class on where they should “end up” in their conclusions, but rather make an effort to react to each group while they are doing group work, and then to try and connect points and referee the (often heated) discussions that can emerge. I find this assignment gives students opportunity to show off their emerging voices, using a text that gives them ample and relatable evidence to make their points with, while allowing me to feel that I am encouraging their burgeoning literacy in the composition classroom and their awareness of their subjectivities, which corresponds to my goals within a nondemagogic pedagogic structure.

Obviously there are limits to how nondemagogic or queer a classroom can be but, as we are increasingly regulated by corporatized rules of appropriate student/faculty interaction, we must, as David Wallace discusses in “Out in the Academy,” work within the system to create as much change as we can, within the parameters of queer pedagogy and respecting the development of all voices within our classrooms and institutions. I find safety in the strong syllabus—clearly stated rules of conduct and expectations of academic performance. I do not have to spend time being tyrannical or bureaucratic in the moments I spend circling the classroom, interacting with my groups of students,

because I have clearly articulated the expectations of the class in the syllabus. Nondemagogic pedagogy does not have to be nonrigorous, or unfocused, in its deployment (practice) if it has been thoughtfully designed (theory). Eschewing the lectern does not eliminate structure; the use of group work as queer/nondemagogic pedagogy creates a more supple structure, which expands to allow for the multitude of expressions that queer pedagogy demands we elicit from our students.

Queer presences in the classroom can be varied—from the literal body of the queer subject to the practices of interrogating the heteronormative (in texts easily “queered” or resistant to such interrogation, in texts easily called queer or resistant to heteronormative interpretation). Our bodies—the bodies of queer professors—represent not just queer pedagogy, or a commitment to the voices of our students, but also the institutions in which we teach. David Wallace’s ideas of how we can change institutions from within by speaking up—by marking ourselves as queer scholars—strike me as appropriate, even as I am still resistant to explicitly mark my body as queer in the classroom (for reasons descendent from Jane Gallop’s infamous suggestion that the teacher is the phallic symbol in the classroom, and the student is his receptacle). Queer pedagogy does not require a masterful voice, and nondemagogic pedagogy demands a move away from mastery—a move that still champions confidence and scholarship, while it avoids the concomitant concerns that “mastery” suggests. In the intervening years since queer pedagogy emerged, we’ve seen a rapid, constant change in our technologies, and the mores that arise and fall around them—the question of how we interact with our students changes more profoundly when we consider how they can “access” us, using email, social

networking tools, or even address search technologies. Nondemagogic pedagogy allows the suppleness—both for students and for professors—to consider each situation, each new technology, each assignment, each academic challenge as individual, examinable, and worthy of discussion. This pedagogy, like queer pedagogy, does not foreclose based on heteronormative or traditional means, but relies on culture making and world-building to react, respond, and elicit.

Queer pedagogy champions diverse voices, and nondemagogic pedagogy considers an absence of the heteronormative and the *idée fixe* as necessary to developing voices. Neither queer nor nondemagogic pedagogy can or should be codified, but rather, they should continue to be practiced and deliberated in the service of our students.

November: Queer

November 2, 2006 9:23 pm

So nice to have a day off, even if it was spent worrying about students and “issues.” I had dinner with a colleague who is also interested in queer pedagogies and composition issues, and we spent some time comparing “horror” stories and thinking about queer subject positions. I am not an “out” teacher, nor do I feel I have to be. My sexuality and sex life aren’t on the table in the classroom; what is in play, though, is the queer subject position I bring when I devise my syllabus and when I lead class for 75 minutes twice a week. Some students perceive this; some (memorably) do not. Once I was confronted with a student who repeatedly tried to seduce me—nothing so garish as a rose and a birthday suit in my office, but multiple attempts to invite me to dinner, email me on personal business, mentioning how attractive I was in casual conversation during office hours (a big reason I always keep the door open). She seemed completely oblivious to the fact that I had no sexual interest in her precisely because of her biology (as well as her being my student!) and that no amount of cajoling would change that. My colleague has had some plagiarists—although no one seems to have as many as I do—and he is very concerned over the quagmire I have regarding Antwan. I want to be able to help—or even be forgiving—but the nature of what he and Tommy did (and, I suspect, his involvement in Janie’s sudden literacy) makes it impossible for me to be cuddly and Mr. Rogers-like. I feel as though I am going to lose a good student—a smart and inventive student—due to his hypereagerness to be popular, or to be “the man,” or a need to do

more work than just his own. I can't psychologize why he would do what he did, but it's done, and I have to be willing to be unpopular, in the name of fairness.

November 3, 2006 4:02 pm

In the name of multitasking I have botched everything today. I was up late last night, thinking of my mother, worrying about the Antwan situation, thinking about how to handle my classes on Tuesday—in short, panicking over things I couldn't control at 2am. As a result, I was late to head to LaGuardia to pick up my tickets for Los Angeles to appear on *Jeopardy!* (naturally, the bus was stuck in heavy traffic on 125th, and I waited on line interminably at LaGuardia to book the ticket, and the computer was slow, yadda yadda). Consequently, the 2:00 meeting of the English Student Association I was supposed to attend came and went before I arrived at school twenty minutes ago. As departmental representatives go, I am not the ideal choice these days—too emotional and overextended. There is a workshop I should be attending right now, but I am not feeling like doing much, other than retreating into my writing, and finding my way to the bottom of the blankets. If sleep could only be as restorative as it is in fairy tales.

November 4, 2006 10:20pm

I am a bad friend. I spend so much time writing, teaching, thinking about my students or my boyfriend or my mother that I don't spend any time being social or considerate. I made an appearance this evening at the launch of my friend's new literary journal. I say appearance because I stayed less than an hour, drinking two beers, and glancing at the journal. I am particularly bad because I never offered a piece for submission to him—in

the six months he was working on it. I can't blame my semester of drama and fatigue for it. I am just a bad friend.

Comment

Do we have an external life, and how related is it to our pedagogy, or our classroom performances? I vowed when I started teaching not to be one of “those people” who only spoke of teaching when socializing, and slowly began only socializing with other educators so that we can foreclose discussion outside our collective purviews. Being a “bad friend” (to non-academic friends) seems commonplace given the demands for our academic performance and productivity.

November 7, 2006 11:20pm

I am on the verge of collapse. This day has had its mood swings. Currently, I am watching CNN's coverage of the nail-biting Senate races across this nation. Moderate voters are mad as hell, and they're not taking it anymore. Looking at the map of House voting patterns really establishes the swathes of red and blue across the country—from the Republicans in Western Pennsylvania and New York to the firm Democrats in Northern Mississippi and Western Kentucky. The easy North vs. South argument is not quite so simple when faced with this map, which shows the gradations of resistance to either side's dominant ideologies. Such a map demonstrates the American penchant for rebellion and resistance, even to George Bush. Today was a bit disastrous in terms of doing what was expected of me. I woke up late—and didn't vote until after dinner. I was uninterested in my poetry presentations at 8:30—certainly from lack of sleep—and couldn't enjoy the brouhaha that Jacob and Cassandra started when they tangled on the

meaning of Robert Herrick's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time." Is the narrator urging marriage, or licentious horniness? I stayed mute, even as I should have been tickled over finally getting some combat in that otherwise staid class. I spent the interim hours simply working out how to teach *Medea* and *Paradise Lost* in the next few classes, as well as finishing grading response papers for my composition students. They are starting to gain confidence in their arguments—particularly Martika and Gerry—although Melanie and Aliah continue to hide behind generality.

The group presentations were particularly excellent on *Antigone*. The six groups had three topics (two groups to one topic) related to subject (is the play about Creon or Antigone?), gender and age, and the concept of the hero's determination and hubris. Lynette and Arnold carried Group 6—which was evident from their crisp reading of their paper, and Edward and Allison's butchered stammering. Their paper was full of quotes and attention to the topic, although it lacked insight, particularly into each character's prideful downfall. Group 5, on the other hand, with the same topic, offered little by way of quotes but, anchored by Wilbur's words (the paper has his cadences and flourishes—right down to the references to Gilgamesh and pollution that intersect with Wilbur's own papers on the topics) and Nancy and Krystle's passionate delivery, their group provided a jazzy performance that started the class off with vitality.

Group 4 was saved by research, loading up their piece on the functions of age and gender in the play with quotes that judiciously backed up their points. That is because Christian anchored their group with his typical research—much of which was confirmed by his

coming up to me during in-class work time to ask me for perspective on whether he was going in the right direction. Roy smoothly delivered his lines, but it was unclear if he'd actually read *Antigone*. Alvina continued to struggle—and to tell me after class that she doesn't quite understand the text—but she took my advice to get the plot summaries off Spark Notes and then read for content afterwards, and her general demeanor seems to be improved. Alas, Marjane, who chats loudly during group work, and about whom her classmates have complained in group work reflections (Christian graciously gave credit to Alvina and Roy for their contributions, but couldn't be so nice regarding Marjane's distracting antics), stammered and giggled her way through her lines, clearly having never read the paper, much less *Antigone*. When I asked their group to relate Creon's decisions to the modern justice system, Marjane actually replied, "I don't understand—there are no judges here," before Christian covered with a logical response on the role of the individual versus the need for common good through enforcement of laws.

Unfortunately, Marjane's multiple faux pas seemed even more egregious once Group 3 tackled the same topic. With Amalia and Tamia anchoring the attack, the well researched and written paper was given solid presentation, with Damon, Francis, and Christine reading their parts well (if it was clearly written largely by Amalia, and polished by Tamia). Their group did not appear to work well together during class (it seemed Amalia did much of the work, while the others chatted about world affairs), but they all write conciliatory, praising comments in their reflections. It seems Amalia has learned that sometimes you have to carry the load for a group in order to preserve your individual

needs—which ironically was the onus of their paper defending Creon’s actions. Poetic, indeed!

Groups 1 and 2, reporting on whether the play is about Antigone or Creon, offered much the same interpretation: the play is about both of them. The papers were solidly constructed (likely by Leanne and Diego in Group 2 and Lizzie and Lance of Group 1) and boringly presented, with mind-numbing monotony. I was having trouble caring, although I did pity Group 1, which was missing Arnetia and Martina and had to present with three members, and improvise a missing section that Arnetia never submitted. Nonetheless, boredom carried the end of class—to the point that when I read the papers later, it was as if I’d never heard them before. I am still firmly a proponent of group work, but six in a row in one class can be similar to a barrage of Novocaine.

The day was dominated, though, by the peculiarity of withdrawals. Jose withdrew from my classics section, which was a minor surprise, since he gave no indication in conference that he was considering the possibility. It also affected his group, which I will have to take into consideration when grading the group presentations. Arnetia, who continued to attend after committing plagiarism twice—and, indeed, was doing some good work on her one submitted paper and her group interactions—did not attend class today, nor did she come to see me regarding withdrawal. I really don’t understand the thought processes that emanate from the students who commit plagiarism but do not withdraw (which itself is an easy way out). I was raised in an era where F had a stigma attached—not the opportunity to redo it without penalty later.

The strange inversions really hit in composition, which was sparsely attended (perhaps because second drafts were due). The day was spent on peer review, with time for mini-conferences with me during the session. It was a productive moment for students like Martika and Gerry—who have been consistently looking for my help—to come spend time having me look over their papers, asking me questions about where to go or what to do within their frameworks. As I allow students to keep their papers for two more days before I collect them (thus using peer review and mini-conferencing as part of the editing process), this gives them a chance to really turn in shiny, polished work.

Marius handed me a stack of eight response papers—“as promised,” he said with a wink and a smile. Of course, a glance at the work revealed that it is nearly all a book report. I wrote him a short letter in which I expressed my hopes that he will learn from this episode that doing all the work at once does not buttress a process meant to improve the work—instead he had done mediocre work, across-the-board, without perspective or position on the material, and he was behind his classmates in developing perspective. I’m giving him the letter and the pieces back on Thursday.

Janie did not attend. I suspect that, much as she assured me that she will maximize her time with me despite her impending F, I will not see her again this semester. Similarly, Lindsey did not attend. When I advised her to withdraw, it wasn’t a referendum on her abilities, but rather a caution against passing with an inferior grade and then being unprepared for the rigor of the next class in the sequence, English 201.

Arthur brought me his paper early—as I requested—and although it is still largely paraphrased and not well constructed, I gave him the okay to continue in the class without an automatic F hanging over his head. Given his writing abilities, and the need to do something punitive (grade-wise) with the plagiarism, he will likely score no higher than a D in this class, but evidently he needs it. Arthur explained to me during class that not only is this his third opportunity (and last) to pass English 101, his ability to have the class reimbursed by his employer is contingent on passing. So, his motivations are clear, at last, and while they are less than ideal in the pursuit of higher education, they belong to him and he is at least trying to improve.

Dylan, who neither attended his conference nor contacted me with an explanation for why he did not attend, arrived thirty minutes late to my class and began chatting with Marybeth. I kept waiting for him to bring me his withdrawal slip, but it never happened. Finally, with ten minutes to go in the class, I called him forward for a mini-conference, and asked what his plans were for the class. He shrugged. I explained that he was certain to fail (given that he'd not turned in a first draft, never turned in one assignment, and had missed nine classes, including the two for missing conference). He shrugged. I told him that as long as he realized that he was clearly going to fail, he was welcome to continue coming to class and submitting work (which, frankly, seems a bit lax to me: if a student has violated a course rule to a point of failure, s/he should forfeit the right to be there and benefit in the same vein as his/her classmates from my teaching). He shrugged. It was a riveting conversation.

Two students came late, left early, and came back. Linda arrived fifteen minutes late, and immediately approached me to discuss her withdrawal options. She said she was “leaving the decision to me.” I immediately informed her that I could make no such decision, and that I could only advise. My advice, though, was that given her recent grandparent’s death in another country (there appeared to be an epidemic of dead grandmothers this semester in that country, I noticed), she should consider withdrawing and retaking the class when she could focus on properly catching up on work. She looked stricken—such pain in her eyes—but she decided to leave and get the paperwork so that I could sign off on her withdrawal. Given her early promise, I was rather stricken myself by Linda’s descent, and sad that she was going.

Antwan arrived twenty minutes late, and was awfully quiet during class, although I did overhear him discuss his situation with Aliah, who seemed to be trying to console him. He also approached me, about an hour into class, to have me sign his withdrawal form. I did. He offered his hand to shake, which I did, and wished him good luck. After class, he was at the door to walk me out, wanting to discuss his options. I told him he really didn’t have any—as the plagiarism situation stood with Tommy, they were both equally culpable, and that it was a serious offense. I tried my hardest to sound like every teacher I had growing up trying to impart wisdom and guidance, but I fear I sounded like an elite, Ivy-educated prat being rigid to a teenager who didn’t understand the severity of his actions. I do hope Antwan thinks well of me someday, but I fear he won’t understand that the punishment did fit the crime.

Comment

In looking to avoid hegemonic classroom states, I often avoid pat “right answers,” preferring whenever possible to offer multiple options to students. Harriet Malinowitz has explained, “It is possible to ‘include’ new discourses and yet simultaneously deny the tensions that exist around their proximity and their competing claims for territorial definition. Naming and engaging with these tensions is what sparks the chemical reaction that ineluctably queers the brew” (252-3). I find this persuasive—it is not up to me to define what is right, what is wrong, or even what is queer: classroom discourse will do that when I identify and engage the tensions, and encourage my students to do the same.

My feelings about peer review come into play—I try as often as possible to encourage my students to be critical and constructive with each other, which amplifies their own voices while helping them to discover new valences of their writing skills. Thomas Newkirk has written about the ways in which we can listen to our students during peer review that will engage us further with their construction of voices simultaneous with their development of writing skills. It raises the students’ stakes while also maintaining the dynamic of challenge that I hope to evoke from them. I do think it helps raise the confidence of the room—particularly when there has been a desultory groupspeak developing that targets the professor as the figurehead for criticism (and of criticism, of their work). Peer review allows the students to take ownership of their own criticism, and to notice their own critical skills improve as they improve the work of their classmates. Egalitarian, and it seems to work (in my experience).

November 9, 2006 3:55pm

A quick word while they are still free-writing on marriage (we are going to debate some gay marriage issues today—specifically about whether something that looks like, smells like, and acts like a marriage is actually a marriage, and what it means to bring a subject position to a discussion—such as personal morality that refuses to let you see the duck is quacking in front of you). Linda unexpectedly came to class! Despite my signing her withdrawal, she is here. I suspect there is some less than heroic reason (like financial aid reasons or she's already dropping another class), but I can hope and dream that she is truly happy to be coming back and hoping to develop some writing skill in the next few classes. Marius smirked when he saw my letter, so I suspect he knows how mediocre and half-assed his work is.

Comment

The aporia in the last journal entry is the aching, gnawing sense of second-guessing the “Antwan” situation that I was going through—that day, and many days since. There are students we feel we did “right” by; and there are some we feel we “failed.” I’ve never stopped feeling like I should have been able to do more for Antwan—that I should have convinced his vulture-like “friends” to own up to their academic thievery, that I should have devised a way to allow Antwan to continue while still holding him accountable for his transgressions. No matter how many times I’ve thought and re-thought the situation, and realized I was correct and just in how I handled it—and how I gave them every opportunity to spare Antwan from failing/withdrawing from the class—I still wonder whether I was wrong.

November 12, 2006 12:25 pm

I have been through an emotional wringer the past few nights. On Thursday night, I went to an event for the Kelly Writers House, a wonderful hub for the writing community at my alma mater, the University of Pennsylvania. While I got to catch up with former professors and classmates, I also had the chance to listen to writers affiliated with the House—from a freshman through graduates and professors—read from their work. Particularly affecting was the reading of Alice Elliott Dark, who read from her short story, “In the Gloaming.” I recently read the piece in a collection of short stories related to AIDS, and was struck by its emotional core (even as some of the attitudes toward the never-named homosexuality seemed stilted and mercifully dated to the late 80s). Still, the recent experience of reading was no preparation for Ms. Dark’s oral performance, and the nascent connection of a mother to her dying son. The story tells of a final gloaming—that period of time when the sun is setting—in the lives of that mother and son. As tears welled in my eyes, I thought of the last gloaming my mother and I shared—or didn’t share, as it were. As the sun waned on a Saturday in August, and the rains began a light misting, I left our encampment, with my mother a drunken sod on her bed—awake or passed out, I couldn’t begin to tell you—and I swam in the pond, the beautiful Curlew Pond of my youth (and her youth, and her mother’s youth) and I kept swimming until dark. Our last gloaming was spent in silence, in separation. Dark’s mother learned to love, to accept her son, in their last gloaming, but I never got to love or accept my mother, filled as I was with disgust and anger at her disregard for her health, and for me. I’ll never have that last gloaming back, and that realization caused the waves of grief once again to overcome me. Fortunately for my public persona, the stray tears yielded to

warm applause when the reading was finished, and a dab of the napkin helped eliminate the evidence of my mourning.

Friday was not so simple. With prime seats to see the new Broadway musical, *Grey Gardens*, I should have been ecstatic. However, my encounter with the gloaming left me unfurled and ragged all day. Familiar with the plot of the musical (a mother and daughter live in their decrepit, formerly glorious Long Island mansion) but never having seen the documentary it was based on, I had no idea that I would be seeing a text ripe for my projection. Edith Beale had the regality and bearing of my late grandmother, along with the decrepitude that snuck up on her in old age when she lived in urine-stinking, overheated public elderly housing. And Little Edie—with her hopes dashed but her mind still sharp and revolutionary—well, it was not hard to project my mother up there. As Christine Ebersole, in what will be considered a legendary performance, launched into her 11 o'clock number, “Another Winter in a Summer Town,” my mother appeared. Nothing heavenly or formal to it—the simplicity of exchanging one image for another. Little Edie stands at her door, unable to leave, singing about the cold, about the waning of a life that still needs to be lived, and what I saw was my mother: as I imagined her as a drama-loving schoolgirl, with comedic timing and belting out songs; as the mother in Pave earrings and smart shoulder pads in the 80s; as she became, browbeaten by age, by fatigue, by an inability to lick her demons. Each of those iterations of my mother sang to me, bringing down the house, bringing me to such a degree of grief that I could hardly breathe. As the show ended and the standing ovation inevitably was rendered, I could

hardly look at the bravura Ebersole, basking in our adoration. It was hard to accept that my mother would never play Little Edie.

That I broke down completely outside the theater was hardly surprising. Since I've gotten home, I've been consigned to bed, weak and numb. I am so consumed by the fatigue of my grief, and all I can do now is to try and restore some of my previous enthusiasm to my teaching this week and to my writing. After a week so busy with dinners and reminiscences and emotional teaching experiences, my soul is certainly ragged, tattered, and battered.

November 14, 2006 11:00am

You can tell the end of the semester is near. Students wander in thirty minutes late to seminar, and just don't care. Students don't post on Blackboard, and they don't seem to be listening to the threat of a quiz next class. And ultimately, the professor is too distracted by his future game show appearance, his writing commitments, departmental luncheon commitments, and his dead mother, to follow through with empty, punitive threats. Inertia and ennui as seductress have caught us all in a net this morning.

I'm looking over past writing output in the last few months. I used to write so much more, with more vitality and without having to prompt myself. It has definitely reached a point where the inertia and ennui have set in, even now in this reflective space. I feel my own desires to say and do nothing infiltrating the page. I am certainly fatigued—so sick of teaching, writing, students, departmental events, office hours, syllabus planning, paper

generating, and paper submissions to journals. Mostly, I'm sick of missing my mother. It's sublimating into everything else—sapping all my enthusiasm.

This morning I ran into a colleague with whom I really want to work—she is concerned with creating a Gender Studies major, a cause I am wholeheartedly committed to but have had no time or energy to even attend a meeting. I felt utterly useless trying to heavy-handedly explain my semester in purgatory. “Oh, my mom died, and I spend many weekends in New Hampshire, mourning and stuff, and I'm teaching three crazy classes, spending as much time as possible with my boyfriend without driving him crazy, too, and now I am going to be on *Jeopardy!*, which sounds as inane as any excuse given in this paragraph.” It'd be absurd if it was fiction.

I just came across a stack of assignments from a composition group work I mysteriously collected in September. As I recall, the assignment was to argue which of the messages Naomi Wolf posits in *The Rites of Sisterhood* is the most important; each group was assigned one, and the rhetorical strategy was to develop a position and back it up, even if you didn't agree with your assigned message. I am sure I collected the work because one group was not doing anything, and improvised a response (a poorly constructed one, naturally) that irked me. That group comprised Marius, Inman, Carter, Arthur, and Cara (in her only appearance in the classroom). With Inman largely not attending, the other three have begun making strides—both in terms of achievement and attitude readjustment. The instructive thing about re-reading this work is the names: so many are gone, and so many have changed their group dynamics since. Poitra is no longer

attending, but Gerry, Melanie, Marybeth, and Dylan are still doing group work together, even with Dylan's pending F for plagiarism and absences. Poor Erma is the only one left from her group that day—Whit, Mark, and Marnie all have moved on. This is not a surprise given that it's Erma's hard work on the page. Linda, Tommy, Aliah, Lana, and Dodi comprise a group here, and those people have since dispersed into other groups. Similarly, Martika, Marnie, Veronica, Orlando, and Antwan moved into different orbits—and still haven't quite settled. Perhaps this walk down memory lane can be instructive to me in figuring out why the class hasn't connected as a group yet—they still don't quite know each other, or trust each other. I've been focusing on developing my trust with them, and vice versa, but maybe I need to assign some groups and force some development. It may be too late, but I would like to fight this ennui.

Comment

A recurring theme in this later part of the semester has been fatigue; one element of this fatigue is concomitant with mourning, and the physical toll the body takes from intense mourning. Another is the burnout that comes from teaching—particularly three classes while still a full-time student, studying for oral examinations, preparing for a game show appearance, and mourning your dead mother. There has been some critical work in recent years on burnout: a study of 249 Dutch school teachers showed that burnout was more likely to occur when getting limited institutional support or reciprocity from their students. A German study revealed that having the support of your principal was more likely to alleviate burnout in secondary school teachers. While I had plenty of support from my Chair and my department, the burnout was far more holistic and debilitating,

which is reflected in the diminishing returns of journaling, and the professed lack of desire to be in the classroom. Noushad PP has written about burnout in the classroom and clarified the symptoms that are expressed in the syndrome associated with burnout: emotional exhaustion leading to depersonalized responses to work, or persons at work, and reduced personal accomplishments. This journal certainly documents the ways in which emotional exhaustion can deplete the efficacy, if not the commitment, of teaching faculty—and justifies the weekends away, which seem to do a world of good (if only in providing an alternate space to grieve in).

November 14, 2006 6:42pm

What a terribly exciting day today has turned out to be! Perhaps because I was so filled with ennui and doubts earlier, I've had the opportunity to recalibrate my own expectations of myself, and create different classes than were on the "plan" for this afternoon—which resulted in fulfillment for me, and I think fulfillment for my class.

In the classics, we read out passages of Ted Hughes's translation of *Agamemnon*—focusing on the plight of Cassandra, the interactions of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, and finally the motivations of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. The process of reading—with some prompting by me, but nonetheless a volunteer effort—provided a delightful change of pace. Martina and Marjane threw themselves into their shading of Cassandra's lines, while Diego delivered the role of the Chorus with crisp judgment—really thoughtful readings. Alvina, whose English is non-native, nonetheless gave an energetic set of readings as Clytemnestra, and Wilbur imbued Agamemnon with the haughty airs reminiscent of Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*. It was a frothy class, totally

improvised, and gave us a chance to speak extemporaneously on the book, with me constantly interrupting to discuss dark wombs and conflicting motivations in the narration (does Clytemnestra have a right to avenge her daughter? Wasn't Agamemnon right to save his crew—and himself?). We used this as an opportunity to consider once again the role of the Chorus and the narrator—what does it mean to be omniscient? And what does it mean to be Cassandra—cursed to see all, but not be believed? It gave me a chance to consider my pedagogical role in the front of the room—do I control what images my students take under advisement? Am I the final word? Should I be? As I approach *Paradise Lost* in my medieval/early modern section on Thursday, I am concerned about whether I should formally lecture about the “important” notes on Milton, or whether I should stick to discussing the issues I am concerned with—Milton's subversion of rote catechism and his uneasy defenses of Eve and Satan. Luckily, my students in the classics class are so enthusiastic and respectful of my aims that I am fortified by them to wage further battle with my ennui and my pedagogical doubts about how to approach canonical texts.

Our reading for today in composition was (a passionate attack on) “Pornography,” by Margaret Atwood. The students read Atwood's ironic assemblage, “The Female Body,” in one of the first classes, so they were familiar with her style. Still, the piece, which declares most pornography to engender violence, torture, and homicide in men (based on her own experiences in Finland with seeing snuff-style porn), provided a crucial challenge for me. Her perspective—extreme even to me—gives me an opportunity to illuminate the power of persuasive argumentation to my students, who are still struggling

with developing point-of-view and avoiding the passive voice in their writing. As we are becoming a smaller and smaller class, the group work becomes more and more intensely personal, which should yield discussion that reflects their writing process as well—arguments that are specific and not based in groupspeak. I assigned groups today—forcing Marybeth, Dylan, and Gerry (no Melanie in class today) out of their comfort zones, and separating Orlando, Arthur, Dodi, and Oscar (which I hoped would force each to bond with different people). Our free-writing was on “definitions,” and after discussing how definitions provided structure and specificity but don’t change the subjectivity of the definer, we set out to list definitions of words I assigned to each group. The words: pornography, rape, virtual, affair. With the last two words, the lists of definitions tended to the mundane—reproduction of, not quite real (virtual); business, relationship (affair). The first two produced massive lists—some definitions, some descriptions, which Marybeth was careful to differentiate between (much of the pornography list, for instance, described types of it—fetish, S&M, BBM—rather than the components that make it up). Building to the climax, I discussed the ways in which words that have emotional investments from a subject position (i.e. pornography or rape for feminists, for one example) can create different stakes than trying to fan debate about a word with less investment (i.e. affair or virtual).

Rather than try and determine whether pornography is a good thing or not, which seems a Pandora’s box to me, I use the exercise to show how an extreme argument can be used to create definition—to force each reader to react to and define his/her own terms, and to craft responses that are persuasive and invested. It is an opportunity for these students to

really invest in their writing; whether students have seized this opportunity is something I will find out when I collect their next assignments, on Katha Pollitt's "The Smurfette Principle"—another piece that may provoke ire or confusion.

Another positive effect of this class lay in the camaraderie and conversations that I witnessed and participated in. Marybeth told me that I baffle her—she always tries to guess what the free-writing will be, and she is often wrong—but that by the end she is “in awe” of how I push us in new directions. Without lapping up the flattery too pointedly, I did find it gratifying that at least one student was thinking about the process of how this class is created—and how I go about executing that creative process in my pedagogy. Orlando told me that I am crazy—but he “means it in a good way.” He and Linda seemed befuddled and agape when I agreed with them, but amended that “being crazy isn't always a bad thing.” That they agreed with. After so much initial resistance and hostility, Orlando always smiles now. Today, particularly, he was so animated and pleasant—to me, and to his group which, saddled with “affair,” still managed to argue about how to work the word. Linda and Marybeth often disagreed with Orlando, and Carter would shrug and smile. Then Linda would want to hit Orlando—she described him as a “pest” who constantly says things to needle her (all smiling, naturally)—while Marybeth would roll her eyes towards me. And I would gently press them back on topic—to channel their energy to the word, and not on hitting each other.

Speaking of assault, while discussing rape, Marius “jokingly” kicked Gerry's desk.

Given the Marius is about 6' and works out regularly, while Gerry is no more than 5'5

and very slight in build, this was about as fair a fight as Mighty Mouse vs. Godzilla. I was in the middle of discussing the fraught term of pornography with Martika, Aliah, Arthur, and Oscar; this discussion leaned to the weird, as we discussed the fetishistic wearing of high heels while stomping rats as a form of pornography, as well as Martika's remembrance of Oprah's dealing with South African "baby rape" in a recent episode [which I pulled up on the e-podium and confirmed the veracity of this practice, which is meant to cure HIV, according to local myth, by deflowering a virgin—in these cases, babies]). When the event occurred, I was forced to dash across the room to respond. As many were laughing, I tried to not alarm the room, but I was rather concerned. Gerry assured me he was fine, but I did caution Marius that he should not do that, even in jest. I also mentioned that if I felt anyone was in danger, I would naturally call Security to deal with it. Lana—clearly stunned and amused by her group's physicality—offered that she doubted any of us, including Security, could challenge Marius's muscular physique (Marius obligingly flexed his muscles, on cue). I simply reported that my job is to call Security, not to hang around and see who wins. Lots of laughter—and then I pushed them to move back to work. (After class, I asked Gerry if he was okay, and if we should discuss the incident with the Counseling department, but he was laughing and did not want to make it an issue).

It was a splendid class—despite the security scare—one I've waited nearly all semester to get to. I still think the trust is nascent, not established, and with only seven classes left, there is not a lot of time to revel in this—but I will try and maximize these moments in

the waning days of class—if only to motivate my students to succeed in improving their writing enough to be prepared for the next level.

Comment

Audre Lorde asked us, “What are the words you do not yet have?” (41). In this moment I finally began to feel that the composition students were really beginning to develop new vocabularies. Amy Winans has told us that “a queer pedagogy draws attention to the parameters of questioning, thus highlighting the process of normalization as it draws attention to the places where thinking stops” (113). I’m relieved to see that start to bear fruit in this session—one in which ideas flowed without any (conscious) control, hegemony, or interpellation. The near-fight brought out different issues—and a recent article on classroom conflict (in *Teaching Professor*) indicates that establishing a nurturing environment (and not being characterized as “cold” in student evaluations) is one way to skirt such moments. I feel as though I prevented an escalation—no matter how facile the near-fight seemed—because the class trusted me to maintain their physical safety the way I’ve safeguarded their intellectual safety as well (an idea that I share with bell hooks, who discusses issues of safety as secondary to creating a “feeling of community” in our classroom (40)).

I’ve mentioned the notion of the holding environment frequently; it’s a space I find most useful for thinking of the classroom, as well as this text. Bollas, in *The Mystery of Things*, describes the forms of free association that he thinks are necessary for productive reparation through psychoanalysis: “The wish for knowledge must not interfere with a method that defers heightened consciousness in favor of dreamier frames of mind,

encouraging the free movements of images, ideas, pregnant words, slips of the tongue, emotional states and developing relational positions” (35). Bollas’ ideas blend well with the work of D.W. Winnicott, whose notion of the “holding environment” is implicitly discussed in *Playing and Reality* as the space created by the good therapist that allows the patient the freedom to “play” and enact transcendent psychic work. In discussing the “playing” of a young child, Winnicott establishes certain definitions for his use of the term: “The area of playing is not inner psychic reality. It is outside the individual, but it is not the external world. Into this play area the child gathers objects or phenomena from external reality and uses these in the service of some sample derived from inner or personal reality. Playing implies trust, and belongs to the potential space between (what was at first) baby and mother-figure. *Playing is essentially satisfying*” (69-70). There are multiple levels of “play” in the holding environments of this narrative: there is the holding environment provided me by friends and family to react and grieve in safe yet nondeterminate ways (a reification of the old maxim “everyone grieves his own way”); there is the act of writing, which provides a holding environment in which to explore emotions and thoughts without external definitions of form (a space Bollas has mentioned in *Being a Character* as dark genera, or a way of creating art from a place of darkness or mourning); and there is the classroom holding environment, in which the professor (using Winnicott’s terms via Peter Elbow, the analyst and moderator) is providing students free space to develop their own thoughts regarding composition, literature, and the formation of individual subject position. This adult deployment of play is consistent with Winnicott’s comments on the locations of cultural experience: “The place where cultural experience is located is in the *potential space* between the individual and the environment

(originally the object). The same can be said of playing. Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play. For every individual the use of this space is determined by *life experiences* that take place at the early stages of the individual's existence" (135, author's emphasis). The act of writing the journal creates cultural experience as implicitly as the act of creating the journal's events (the pedagogic "programming" via classroom holding environment, utilizing free associative techniques, such as free-writing and open, nondogmatic discussion)—so, the act of writing, similar to the therapeutic exoskeleton of a support group, provides remedial and restorative genera. As Adam Philips has noted in his analysis of Winnicott's work, performance is valuable because it denies deadness, and accepts the importance of externality in our psychic work. The adult experiences of developing and interacting with environments provide new opportunities for play, which yield the developmental blossoms that sprout from these loci of cultural experiences. The uses of play and the holding environment richly extend past the analyst and the analysand to the classroom, and to the professor, who uses the holding environment for multiple purposes of pedagogy, mourning, and healing. At the end of this day, I finally see my composition students blossoming in the holding environment I've tried to create for them—which is why I see the creation of a holding environment as a valid, vital use of this psychological trope in the classroom. Jane Tompkins, in *A Life in School*, frequently mentions the need not only to make the classroom a safe space, but also to make it a holistic one, in which the learner also teaches and the teacher continues to learn. As professors, we may not have the time, inclination, or training to be therapists, but that isn't to say that our classrooms can't benefit from the structure of therapy, particularly as a holding environment.

November 16, 2006 12:22 pm

So, I heeded my own advice and taught *Paradise Lost* this morning my way—with an emphasis on getting my students to see what this text can do for them, here in the 21st century. We discussed some of the Blackboard postings—particularly a heated discussion between Cassandra and Vladimir that debated whether Satan is a protagonist and indeed heroic in the text. Naturally, some students—led by Cassandra—rejected this argument on religious grounds, and not within the parameters of the text. I led them to this place on the blackboard this morning with two words, presented in four ways: Satan, God. “Satan,” “God.” Air-quoting as I spoke, I imparted the importance of considering these ideas/people as characters, even as Milton does have theological concerns surrounding them. I related these ideas to the fatwa against Rushdie during the *Satanic Verses* brouhaha (specifically about intolerance of using religious imageries in “sacrilegious ways”); unsurprisingly, most of my students knew nothing about it.

It was a class full of questions: what is “real” when religion is involved in a text? Is Satan demented? Is Adam’s curiosity a weakness? How about Eve’s? Can Milton be a misogynist and also defend Eve in this piece? Why is God less developed a character? Why is Eve always associated with flowers? Is that a form of misogyny? If Milton is all for human rights and actuation, why is he still religious? Many of those came from me, some came from students, but the class spoke. Cassandra, Gina, Chilli, Edina, Jacob—they all responded to each other, without my prompting. Mikhail—who never speaks in class—jumped into a discussion about orthodoxy. It seems the enforced use of Blackboard paid off in a larger discussion today—they were willing to speak up—even

people like Armandia and Vondi, who speak often on Blackboard but never in class. It's very exciting—particularly after the ennui around the room last class. Perhaps my energy this morning—with the dawning that Thanksgiving is upon us, my orals are so soon, and there are six classes left after today—was renewed, and perhaps it rubbed off, but I'd like to think that utilization of the Blackboard technology is infusing my class with a higher intellectual curiosity and comfort zone. It was terribly exciting! Now to keep it going the rest of the day.

Comment

Another virtue of the modern technology in our classrooms is the ability to use spreadsheets not only to record grades, but also as a living document of each class. Using “comments,” I can note conversations, with dates and times, withdraws and drops, late assignments, precise moments of lateness; moreover, these documents allow for a constant recursiveness into the evolution of each class (similar to when I “discovered” old assignments done by groups with members who'd since dropped, stopped attending, or who'd shifted their “cliques” in the interim). There is also the relief of grading being done in one convenient locale, but the pleasures of the vivid commentary in the spreadsheet can be just as illuminating as the vicissitudes of the teaching journal itself.

November 16, 2006 5:30pm

The afternoon was peaceful and calming. Perhaps my desire to make it to my weekend got me through with a minimum of fuss. As part of the adaptation component of my classics course, we are watching the wildly overacted 1946 adaptation of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, after a short period of discussion about our current textual orientation in either *The Oresteia* or the O'Neill play. Today we finished *The Hunted*—the first

segment of *MBE*—and so the discussion compared it with *Agamemnon*. I readily acknowledge that it seems many did not do their readings for today—focused as many were on the fruition of today’s assigned paper. I received sixteen papers today; one was on the function of weaving in *Medea* and *Agamemnon* (an excellent paper topic, if I do say so myself, for it gives rich compare/contrast opportunities between these plays, and opportunity to explore the function of the traditional (women, weaving, hearth & home) versus the wicked (the woven as murder weapon)). I received one paper comparing Christine Mannon to Clytemnestra—another fine topic on how we adapt (although the paper was executed with disastrous inattention to topics—the writer tried to answer both this topic and the other assigned topic, resulting in a muddle). The other fourteen were on the “easy” topic—to decipher Clytemnestra’s stated motives for her killing of Agamemnon, and to discuss her alternate motivations as well as the role of Aegisthus. The large problem I’ve had with this topic—both times I’ve assigned it in teaching this course—is that students answer with plot, and do not provide any context for their answers, which leads to underdeveloped submissions. As a result of today’s due date—and the preponderance of work focused on Clytemnestra—it was clear very few had read the O’Neill, which led to nervous chuckling when I asked basic questions—what differences exist in the personages between the two? The tones? The motivations of Christine versus Clytemnestra? Arnold averted my gaze; Krystle looked away; Nancy wriggled in her chair. The class collectively felt uneasy—and even a bit guilty; it is sweet that they even care enough to feel guilt.

The viewing experience was peculiar in that I was often the only one laughing at the wild overacting—between the hoi polloi studio types playing townsfolk in the opening scenes and Katina Paxinou’s hyperemotive, vitriolic Christine, subtlety was in short supply. Even Roz Russell—who, legend has it, was convinced she was winning the Oscar for this performance (losing stunningly to Loretta Young in one of the great Oscar upsets)—was not immune to the bug, often raising her eyebrows to rarified heights while bugging out those eyes in response to the horrors fair Vinnie discovers in the first act. I did hear Tamia laugh often—and given that she was one of the few answering my earlier questions, I suspect she is invested in my concerns here on adaptation—but for the most part it was not a gratifying experience. The dissatisfaction was underscored when Marjane—increasingly the weakest link—asked, “So what does this have to do with the reading?” A chorus of “What are you saying?” was directed at her before I could even raise my own eyebrow at her characteristically unconsidered utterance. I do hope Tuesday brings more investment; in case that is not the case, I’ve loaded Blackboard with provocative questions: “Is Christine Mannon a drag queen?” “Is Vinnie hot for her father?” etc., with the hope that my students will rise to the challenge. We’ll see.

Our readings in composition today revolved around the qualities of toys—gender identities and projections in Barbie and Smurfette, as well as the notions of marketing in toys and cartoons. The free-writing was built around “toys”—what is connoted by the term, up to and including adult variations. I gave a brief overview of Winnicott’s transitional objects—but stopped short of “teaching” it, rather using it as background for our discussion of what makes toys dangerous. This overview launched us into Katha

Pollitt's discussion of "The Smurfette Principle" and its reification of choices for girls (nurse, rather than doctor, for instance). Instead of group work, I split the class into two, and devised a debate on whether the Smurfette Principle is true or not. The only major decision I made regarding group composition was to separate Marybeth into the "not" side, since I suspected she would motivate some of the less enthusiastic people, and to place Gerry against her. As predicted, they dominated discussion, but Erma, Martika, and Melanie were also quite avid debaters, along with the tangential but nonetheless passionate Dylan and Orlando. A fun class, it was also a day about sharpening argumentativeness and tightening evidence to be impervious to attack. With their final drafts due in two weeks, it's paramount that these skills be readied.

I am nervous about the final few classes—nervous that their papers and portfolios will be disappointing—to me, and to them, and nervous that, with the semester's end, my investment will be returned with meager dividends, and that I'll be more raw and laid bare in the upcoming holiday season than I expect to be. I am pessimistic, though.

Comment

The pessimism and nerves of their often scattershot work notwithstanding, the importance of a sense of fun and a willingness to throw the plan out is significant to keeping the class stable in the final few weeks. For as exhausted as I am, they are often more so, and balancing a fluid matrix of conflicts in their priorities (sometimes for the first time). Oftentimes my class is low on that "priority totem," so to prevent them from falling off altogether, building a sense of community and togetherness through "fun" and shared transgressiveness is crucial to keeping those teetering on the edge from falling.

I've often incorporated vaguely conceived days into the syllabus ("Grammar Workshop"; "Final Draft Discussion") which allow flexibility not only for when we fall behind organically, but also for moments where the class goes in a tangential (but relevant) direction—such as an impromptu discussion of their stress levels.

November 19, 2006 3:15pm

It's refreshing to watch the Patriots game in New England. They are swamping the Packers, in Green Bay, which is bringing about an infectiously joyful attitude all around the house. Dad is making lasagna, Dusty is humming, Foey is playing with the two dogs—140 lb quiet Newfie George and 15 lb hyper Shar-pei Star. Time away from New York—indeed, away from the concerns of academics and pedagogy—is alluring with its delivery of relaxation and rejuvenation. Being here reminds me of all that is lost—my father's efforts at lasagna don't quite resemble my mother's—but also of all that remains. I don't know if my father will ever marry Dusty, but they are comfortable and creating a bucolic paradise in this quiet corner of New Hampshire. Two dogs, sixty hens, and a horse called Joey: it's not Noah's Ark, but it's an idyll for this citydweller. Foey is a bit startled at the lack of nightlife—indeed, day life, too—but it's not really about living here so much as it is about preparing to live again, elsewhere. We're going back to the city tonight—none too soon for Foey's antsy pants, but I'll feel like I'm missing something. The relaxation is very seductive to this tired guy...

Comment

I'm struck, reading this small, somewhat irrelevant passage about a sojourn to the country, by the similarities to shellshock and the delicate process of recovery, documented so fastidiously in Pat Barker's *Regeneration*. Like that novel's good

therapist, Rivers, encouraging various treatments to work through the trauma of war, this journal, the many side trips, and the support of my colleagues and friends provided much therapeutic space to work through my fatigue, twitches, manias, and profound sense of loss.

November 21, 2006 10:45am

What is it about a movie that is so seductive to a class in late-semester bloom? This morning my budding early modernists watched the first two-thirds of Derek Jarman's film adaptation of Marlowe's *Edward II*, a film once described to me as "BBC produced smut." I certainly expected some squeamishness as male nudity and homosexual cavorting were given the limelight, but to my delight and shock, there was no such drama. Indeed, the students were receptive. To the film? I'm not sure. To watching *any* movie instead of discussing the Elizabethan era? Most certainly. I scanned the room while we watched and their eyes were fixed on the screen. No sleeping here, no cell phone manipulation; no laughter or joy, either. The image, the flicker, the likeness of the movie, wavering as it was through the projector, transfixing my students' gazes. Post-class, I discussed the symbolisms—snakes and fornicating sailors and Tilda Swinton's overdetermined enunciation of "queer" (the film is hardly subtle). Cassandra and Gina and Jacob led the charge to answer my questions, but the star was still the memory of the flickering image through the Epson projector (much as *Dead Poets Society* was often the star in English classes throughout my high school career—a four- or five- day way to give the teacher time off while still "teaching a valuable lesson"). There is something wondrous and alluring about the film and the reproduced image that captivates us—our students, ourselves—and generates good will and thanksgiving at this time of the fall

semester. I'm sure watching BBC-produced smut was what John Alden and Priscilla Mullins had in mind.

On another front, on her way out the door, pivoting and yelling, Antalya declared to me, "You've clearly lost weight since we started. The new haircut really works for you, too. Keep it up!" I must admit the flattery cajoled a smile from me; I am fifteen pounds lighter than the day we began this semester and my new haircut, a modified buzz-cut with some texture on top, is a bit crisper than the shaggy locks that'd been growing out in the last ten weeks. It's put me in a good mood.

November 21, 2006 12:45pm

What is/are gender studies? Studying men and women? Does it impinge on the sovereignty of women's studies? Is there a place at the table for an inscribed reading of race and class within it? How about the queer, and the hardcore, and the fetishistic?

These questions are being asked and addressed in considering the development of a Gender Studies major at John Jay. I've sat in now on the second of what will doubtless be many planning meetings to devise the structure, scaffolds, and content of such a major (and to delineate more clearly the differences between Gender and Women's Studies in ways that do not seem pejorative to either). I can't tell you whether I have anything to offer—indeed, the more I listened, the more I heard a diversity of subject positions expressed. Can I privilege my own? I do in the classroom, but the formation of pedagogy is a bit different than the formation of a department. Or is it? How does interpellation function in spaces where there are polysemous questions and answers

alike? Everyone begins to spout jargon, and it's the catchiest jingo that collects the accolades. I am not implying that there was anything untoward going on in the session, but certainly I would suggest that in places filled with a diversity of perspective, it is often the mellifluous voice that is heeded. I suspect that will be borne out in the months ahead moving toward the development of this major.

Comment

I've read Carol Gilligan's "Joining the Resistance: Psychology, Politics, Girls, and Women," and while I found it persuasive how she located the end of resistance in girls in the moments in which their bodies marked them as women, I felt foreclosed upon by it (irrationally, I suspect). Still, I am dubious about the recent move to the new lingo; the jury is still out, as "gender studies" seems inclusive enough, but a recent work, *Feminism and Composition: A Critical Sourcebook*, includes a section on "Gender, Teaching, and Identity" that is utterly devoid of male voice or reference. If gender is simply a new synonym for women, then I will continue to be foreclosed upon (as Judith Halberstam has done to gay white men) as a contributor in feminist discursive spaces. It is troublesome to see institutional weight thrown behind work that I believe is simultaneously preventing my voice from being amplified (an ironic reversal of the work I do in the classroom). If interrogating heterosexual cultural dominance is meant to be a trope of Gender Studies, then there should be room at the table for many (including those with traditional genders and sexualities alike).

November 21, 2006 4:40pm

I am leaving for the airport any moment. I'm definitely ready for a small vacation, even if it will be emotionally fraught with the weight of my mother's death, and the disassociation my brothers and I are feeling with our extended family. I've struggled to accept myself as an outsider—to allow my natural inclination to be off-center, visible and unrestrained. I've found that rhythm in the front of the classroom, and it has certainly been a generative, therapeutic space these three months since Mom passed. Afternoon classes were as unproductive as the last sessions before a holiday break often are. We watched the central portion of *Mourning Becomes Electra* in classics, and I reiterated the need for Blackboard postings, since they have been rather lax in responding. Given that one of my topics for discussion is: "Christine Mannon: drag queen?" I rather expected some frothy fun. Alas, I have a handful of timid, unimaginative postings so far; perhaps I expect or project too much on my teenaged denizens of convention. I am curious to see what kind of response is generated over the holiday.

My composition students tried a classic technique on me from high school—the stall tactic. When I was a lad, we had a teacher who could be counted on to not deliver her lesson plan to us because she would digress into discussions of politics, current affairs, Student Council dramas, etc. One semester there weren't any tests because the whole semester was spent discussing the wheres, whens, and hows of the Senior class trip. It was easy to derail her. Dodi and Linda spotted my Achilles heel when my eyes lit up discussing my impending flight to London, and once Aliah seized on the opportunity to ask me about New Zealand, they were in full, digressionary force. The reading up for

discussion was a piece about how “shocking” modern iterations of the Girl Scouts are—replete with lesbians and safe sex discussions. I selected it last summer because it had a conservative viewpoint, but when I re-read the piece prior to class, I was appalled at how badly written the piece was—riddled with circular logic and biases I would never let my students get away with. I intended the free-writing to be “bad writing”; indeed, it was—after twenty minutes of passionately discussing my love of prying open fresh coconuts on the atoll of Rangiroa, imparting the drug possession laws of Amsterdam to a too-eager Dodi, and generally allowing myself to bring some of my personal passions to the classroom. I used the moment, once the digression was reified into full-blown delay, to reiterate what makes good writing—capturing the reader’s interest with vivid detail and passion, while also not falling into the trap of circular logic or assuming that your reader shares the same values or mores as you do. I put this in the context of their final drafts, due in nine days—“Put some passion into them,” I declared. “Make me care,” I exhorted. “Make sense,” I pleaded. Cite your sources! The pep rally was full on. As they wished me a happy holiday and safe voyage moments ago, I felt they were ready to go take on the world, win the big game, deliver me the best papers they are capable of generating, and cure polio, all before the bell rang and they turned back into pumpkins. Ready to sleep on the plane with more vigor and vim than originally intended, I am fired up by them.

November 26, 2006 6:22pm, London time

I have had no desire to write. I do not know if it’s the relaxed vibe here outside of London, playing cribbage and watching American football at 6 in the dark evening of formerly industrial Reading instead of one in the sunny afternoon overlooking Atlanta,

though it's the same moment in both places. We spent this afternoon in the beachfront town of Bournemouth, which needed a civic enema in terms of constipation and cleanliness, but provided us with some respite from our lazy idyll in Reading. My brothers, Frank and Tom, as well as Foey and me, walked and walked. We talked and talked. We took pictures of high tide, and cleaned the heavy mist from our spectacles every ten minutes or so. We did nothing of note. Now we are back in Reading on this, our final night, playing cribbage, collectively cooking a traditional Thanksgiving dinner, three days late, in a country that doesn't celebrate it and has no turnips or yams or butternut squash.

I'm writing here out of habit, to share my observations. We are motherless children now and we have a good time with it. My brothers are vivacious, stubborn pugilists, eager to argue and laugh simultaneously. Foey is not from our world, but he is learning to breathe the air here. This football game we are lazily watching, without investment, is a time killer until our Patriots play at 9pm; we'll serve dessert at halftime of that game. Our dinner should be done any minute; Frank is handling the turkey for the meat eaters, while I am heating up a goat cheese and red pepper quiche from Tesco for the lone vegetarian—me. I'm not thrilled to be the lone vegetarian any more than Tom is to be the lone heterosexual in the room, but we play the decks we are dealt. Which reminds me: I think we shall go to the casino after the Patriots game. There is a local gambling club within ten minutes walk of Frank's flat; everyone knows him there, since he spends many nights drinking his dinner while playing blackjack at the casino. It seems as good a place as any to finish our trip; we collectively went our first night—I lost 5 pounds in a

see-saw hour of blackjack, while Foey lost 25 in fifteen minutes, and Frank lost a few hundred, casually, over the long night—Foey and I left long before Frank and Tom closed the casino at four AM that Wednesday night (or Thursday morning).

We went to London on Friday—just Foey and me. I kept falling asleep on him—on the tube; on a bench in the Tate Modern; at the evening performance of Tom Stoppard’s uneven new play, *Rock and Roll* (and worse, I kept moaning at the theatre in my sleepy haze, and Foey would have to snap my arm to prod me from the stupor). It was a lovely day, but I was such a somnambulist that I have nothing to offer. It was me—and Foey has pictures to prove I was there—but only my body. I am not sure my mind has been here, or continues to be. On top of our departure in the morning, I have to consider my upcoming appearance on *Jeopardy!*, and how ill prepared I feel, emotionally or otherwise.

Comment

I’ve spoken previously about the “performative exoskeleton,” which is my riff on Andrew Solomon’s ruminations on the value of support groups to provide a skeletal strength when you are lacking structure of your own. For me, it is not the end-result, but the choice to participate in the process *is* the therapeutic genera here: in the repetition of keeping this teaching journal, it has become an exoskeleton for me. I mention in this entry that I keep writing out of habit, but it is the habit that became a safe holding environment for me, and the act of writing provided constant solace, as well as an intellectual and productive outlet for my academic pursuits and concerns. I am constantly

urging students to write, even when they claim to have nothing to say, because the act of writing can be reparative, even when you are unaware of the reparation.

November 27, 2006 3:30am, London time

Flight leaves in twelve and a half hours. Haven't packed or slept. Just won three hundred pounds playing blackjack. My youngest brother trumped me, winning over a thousand pounds on roulette. Foey kept his hands in his pocket, so that was a win unto itself. I am a little concerned at Tom's irrational exuberance when gambling—he is also the same man who lost \$900 in an hour at craps, and who descends from a genealogy of working stock janitors and mechanics, from which I appear to me a genetic malfunction, or product of cross-breeding Italian-Germans with the Irish. I wish I could be so irrational, but I put the money aside, and walked away as soon as I started losing. The Patriots won earlier, and our dinner was a bit sad. I'll always have my brothers (I hope). No one seems to think I am going to win on *Jeopardy!* It's not a question of confidence or rudeness so much as a foreboding feeling that I am going to have bad luck of some kind—a good opponent, questions I don't know, jet lag—that will create a vortex of suck. I suspect they are right, but I need to relax about it and not make it a self-fulfilling prophecy. Need sleep.

November 29, 2006 10:05pm, Las Vegas time

There are many who say it's not how whether you win or lose, but how you play the game. I tell my students—especially in composition—that it's about process, not grades. I see the glazed looks of disbelief coalescing with nods of agreement, and I wonder how much of that either of us believes. Certainly today, after my gracious but underwhelming

appearance on *Jeopardy!*, I wonder whether it's the result that counts. It was a charming experience, overall—the green room was thick with sizing up and psyching out, but also with banter, good-natured bonding, and a sense of blessing that we were “good” enough to make the show. I spoke with a fellow New Hampshireite who was now L.A.-based who was simply “thrilled to be there.” I nodded in agreement but my glazed look of disbelief was probably crystalline. I was there to win, and while I thoroughly enjoyed the experience of chatting with the staff, being photographed with Alex Trebek, and making my Final Jeopardy answer a shout-out to my high school (Alex needed an explanation as to who this John Stark was), the fact was I lost. And badly—to a young file clerk from suburban Philadelphia who was somehow faster than me every time we picked up the buzzer, who knew every answer she tried, and who found every Daily Double. Even the defending champion, with two wins, \$40k, and a soft Texan twang, ended up in third place, as utterly behind as I was after the slaughter. My boyfriend—the one witness I permitted to my execution—keeps telling me how “good” I looked, how “charismatic” I was in conversation with Alex (telling an anecdote about tripping him long ago in Mobile, AL), how smart I sounded on those rare moments I actually buzzed in. The vivacious contestant administrator let me know that I had nothing to feel bad about—that I played against a great player having a sensational game, and that I was dignified and gracious. She is paid to say that, but I believed her. I believed all who consoled me today. I know they are right. I know I will treasure this experience; I know I will process this into something generative and productive. Blah blah process process. I wanted to win. I think I remember what it feels like to want A's at all cost, and perhaps I should

repurpose this moment the next time a gifted but underperforming student wants to know where s/he stands grade-wise rather than in terms of improvement or performance.

Waiting to fly home, I spent a lovely lunch bitching into my curly fries at Mel's Drive-in Diner on Sunset Strip. I went shopping at Amoeba Records—which is evidently famous, so Foey tells me—and bought some Anna Netrebko and Denyce Graves recordings to make me happy this weekend. I took a long drive along the PCH. I watched the sun set at Zuma much as Foey and I did at Manhattan Beach last night (and indeed as we did in Bournemouth, 6000 miles away, three days ago). Relax I did; mourn I do not. Dylan Thomas raged into the dying of the light, and so would I, if my buzzer had worked on that answer, and the nascent champion hadn't swooped in to steal a question I knew so well that it physically shook me when I could not get the answer out.

I just can't tell yet how this will translate in class in seven hours. I will be rather tired. I am also showing the end of *Edward II* and doing class evaluations, so it's not like I have much pedagogy to offer tomorrow, but how this experience will infuse my place in the front of the room is still up for grabs. Frankly I need to sleep and I think I'll save the tears and tantrums for the weekend.

November 30, 2006 7:48pm

What a disaster today has been—really, the height of lethargy, uncontrollable externalities, and a readiness for this dreadful November to end. My flight circled JFK for an hour, making me nauseous and completely destroying my chances of arriving to my early modern class's planned session on *Edward II*. That damned flight was so late

that I went home and took a three hour nap—which made me sleepy by the time I returned to school, to find my office a mess, a textbook delivery I have been waiting for pilfered, and the dry heat of North Hall to be completely unbearable on this unseasonably warm New York day. I was frustrated, and not really desirous of being there. My composition students had their final drafts due this afternoon—so they were a dispersed bunch (only 13 showed up, 11 actually with drafts, 8 of those actually presentable papers of appropriate length and style) with relief on their faces. Relief and paranoia. After their free write on “happy feet” (the name of a new penguin movie as well as a happy term), I talked about the process of finishing their papers. I talked about process and how you have to persevere when you don’t necessarily want to. And I told them about my fatigue, my rage, my sadness, my mourning—I told them about my day on *Jeopardy!* I spent nearly a half-hour fielding questions, interrupting the flow of the class with my life but relating it as best I could to the learning process: I was losing, I felt like walking off the stage, but I stayed and fought. I clawed and while I never quite made it to the summit, I did enough to dignify myself. I stayed in the game. And, I told them, so did they by persevering when each may have had doubts as to his/her abilities. If I am a motivational professor, this was my most abreactive moment of letting my guard down and letting it all hang out. If I feel ashamed of losing on the game show, I need to take ownership of it. A colleague asked how many emails I’d received under the heading of *schaudenfreude*; I can’t tell you that yet, but I suspect it’ll pale compared to these 30 humbling minutes I spent with my students, giving them a glimpse into my world, and showing them the ways in which it was useful in theirs.

December: Mobius Strips

December 3, 2006 9:49pm

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes in *A Dialogue on Love* that “production of the first person is both labor intensive and felt to be constraining” (207). I’ve felt all semester the strain of keeping this journal—finding time to write often in lieu of a movie with Foey, or sampling a new network program, or sending an email to a loved one, or sulking over my mother’s sudden death. This weekend, in the harsh afterlight of my disappointing week, has been a nurturing and unrelentingly lazy space for me to cocoon in. Despite an increasing number of obligations prompted by the end of the semester and the holidays, and the related preparation I need to do, I have spent the better parts of the last 72 hours asleep, on painkillers, or eating while watching football. My back has been brutalized by all the flying, and so my lower back finally locked up on Friday night—forcing me to hit the last resort of prescription-strength Aleve, which renders me a bit hazy and unable to work, but dulls the knifing knottiness of my back. Foey has been a real godsend—he often misses the subtle cues when I am ailing, but he is beginning to realize I need him (without my explicitness). That is worth its weight in Aleve. He’s been bringing me pad thai and forbidding me to help my friend move into his new apartment and demanding that I sleep and recuperate and mourn. It seems to me that, despite the psychic weight of the things we carry, I am ready to shed the pallor of mourning and the seductive charms of stardom that have dominated my last few weeks and attempt to conquer these next few weeks—to try and underscore lasting points with my classes, to try and star in my myriad daydreams during the holidays, to try and make sense of my pedagogical choices as I

wind down this semester and make decisions regarding the next. I'm having tea with Eve tomorrow so perhaps I will ask her how to keep energy from flagging in the first person.

Comment

No amount of tea or wisdom (no matter the wondrous source) can compensate for the physical and mental exhaustion concomitant with the end of the semester. Awareness and attenuation are the keys: aware that you are at the end of your patience and energy, and crafty enough to attenuate what little you have left of any resource, long enough to get through to the next break. As truistic as it sounds, it's still too common to spot a burned-out colleague in your lounge, crashing hard while desperately trying to finish a never-ending pile of grading or administration. Remembering to take time to regenerate, and that this is part of a process that renews each semester, is paramount to avoiding a significant crash.

December 5, 2006 8:40pm

I am definitely at the end of my tether; a colleague told me today that he's "checked out," and I suspect I am not that far behind him. Today was draining and depressing. My medieval/early modern section had 12 people in attendance when I put *Edward II* in the DVD player for us to finish viewing. By the time 34 minutes had passed and I was up to review the differences in Jarman's and Marlowe's visions, the class numbered 27.

People are rolling in at their whim—the subway is admittedly flawed right now (the A is particularly intermittent and slow) but there is no reason to be consistently 30 minutes late except out of a lack of fear and respect, and a case of ennui. I have been too permissive, and I shall have to remedy it with a quiz next class as we start on *Twelfth*

Night, Shakespeare's most delightfully gender-bent play. I suspect no one will read it, especially with the research paper due next week (which multiple students wanted, at this late date, to start asking foundational questions about: "What should I be writing about?" "Is this a good topic?" "How is this going to affect my grade?"). Part of me doesn't care enough to generate or grade such a quiz, though. It'll have to depend on my state of mind on Thursday.

Regarding *The Oresteia* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, we had a gab session about gender inequality, Katina Paxinou's resemblance to a modern-day drag queen in her performance as Christine in the film version, the roles of dogs and lions in the plays, the valences of "queer" in both sets of plays, the notions of incest and Daddy's girls, and the importance of cultural antecedents in adaptations. A good time was had by all, even if my heart was not entirely in it.

I am basically deadening. My desire to be in the classroom is waning and withering, and I seek sleep, which keeps eluding me thanks to my stiff, unrelenting lower back.

I faced my finest challenge in composition this afternoon when Martika, Marybeth, Gerry, Dodi, and the chorus behind them began asking me direct questions about the semester: "Was it hard? Did I like them? Was it challenging?" I was rather diplomatic but also rather candid. I told them that they were a handful—that not as much work got done as should have, and that they are collectively behind what they need to have accomplished to be in good stead at the next level. I also told them that I was basically

proud of them—the few who'd survived until today—because they did the heavy lifting necessary to turn around a semester that seemed to be at death's door long before my teaching embers began to cool. I am proud of them—in a rather mediated and tenuous way. Martika and Gerry put in a lot of work to improve to the places they reached in their final drafts. Oscar's final paper on Muslim sexuality and closets is quite moving—and at 17 pages, sprawling and unrestrained. He'll get over that instinct to meander.

Still, per usual in composition, my defining moment of the day was not about success, but about failure. Inman turned in his final draft in roughly the same, raggedly opinionated shape as his first draft, save one new feature: there was now a roughly 1½-page prologue that was clearly gleaned from another source. Googling revealed the source of this section—word for word taken from a major news website—and it became clear that Inman was guilty of plagiarizing. I wrote him a note to see me after class to discuss the situation, and when he approached me, there was nary a trace of guilt or shame—his bravado simply demanded “I should revise this, right—add some citations or something.” I incredulously told him that you don't get to revise it after you've been caught plagiarizing—it's a high-end crime in my classroom, mortal and fatal. “So you're telling me what?” he asked, and when I retorted, “You've failed. Plagiarism is failure,” the devastation was sudden and palpable. He backed away, stunned. As I attended to Gerry, who was once again talking me through the minutiae of his citations to make sure I wasn't confused when I read, Inman stood in the back of the room, staring at his paper, trying to stifle his sobs, unsuccessfully. My instinct—the one that wants to build a holding environment in the classroom and on the page—was to console the youth, but it

was one I squelched. Plagiarism must be taken more seriously by these students—and lessons need to be learned without a mitigating pat on the head from the executioner. Consoling Inman may well have balmed my bleeding heart but it would have done him no favors. Still, I feel a bit numb about making a teenager cry—regardless of how the tears were initiated by his own actions. It's not making me want to show up the remaining week. Frankly, I wouldn't mind hiding in bed and mourning in peace.

The cracks in my stoicism are finally beginning to show—just watching a clip of Jim Valvano's speech at the 1993 ESPY Awards (just weeks before he succumbed to cancer) somehow has elicited a projectile stream of tears from me, despite the real lack of connection to my mother. "Don't give up," he said. "Don't ever give up." I really want to tell my mother about my insolent students and my outrageous tales of using losing on *Jeopardy!* as a teaching tool toward recursiveness and the drafting process in writing. Just don't give up, I told them, just as I didn't give up when I was thousands of dollars behind, and hope was dimming. Like Valvano, I perished soon after, but we gave it a good fight. I wish my mother had fought more. I wish my students would fight more. I'm going to fight this out—despite every fight-or-flight response urging me to make a date under my comforter with a good book and a hot towel, I'm going to teach on Thursday, whether I want to or not. It's the least I can do.

December 7, 2006 11:30pm

I am having trouble sleeping, which peaked last night, and then I had to somehow maneuver my way through a full day of teaching and obligations. Not entirely sure how I

did it, now that I have napped my way through the evening and awoken, groggy and not at all refreshed by my crash through the door at 5. I know that composition was a maudlin affair—filled with lots of self-pitying over how hard the class was, how hard college is, etc. I think I was sweet but frankly I don't recall. Free-writing was on meanings, and we discussed political correctness. That discussion was largely me explaining “water buffaloes” (in reference to a famous free speech issue at Penn in the early 1990s) and other assorted tales from the early 1990s that they are blithely unaware of. The more intriguing moments came when they attempted to sidetrack me—to reflect on the class, and their overall abilities. Martika asked me if I hated them. Marybeth asked if this was my worst class. Orlando, smirking, asked how many I planned to fail. I wonder if I gave off a vibe of negativity all semester—certainly I could be foreboding, but our mid-semester détente convinced me that we were copacetic. During this class, my doubts began to resurface. I told them I didn't hate them—that in some ways I loved them more for being such a challenge. I told them they were not my worst class—largely because there are no such things. I told them that thinking in the vulgar language of grading would not reflect on what we accomplished, since so many students who could have folded their hands instead opted to hang in there and try again. It's the spirit of recursiveness—if only they would see that admiration for their esprit de corps and not a letter grade from me. The other classes were largely about my desire to sleep. I gave a pop quiz on *Twelfth Night*; the average score was a 21. We discussed the first sections of *The Aeneid* with an eye to one last group presentation on Tuesday. That pleased my motley crew.

It was a day that makes me wonder what I have signed up for; do I want to feel this tired, this contorted and gastrointestinal, this *old* for the rest of my life?

Comment

The life of the adjunct does not resemble a Carnival cruise; it's often exhausting, underpaid, undernourished, and rife with logistical challenges. Preparing for a semester often begins four months before the first day of class—selecting texts, gathering ISBNs for submission to the Bookstore (on an onerous form, which must be filled out for each section you are teaching, regardless of whether you use the same books across sections), separately requesting desk copies of books from the publishers (often on stationery), beginning to upload documents to Blackboard or to e-reserves (available through the Library, and convenient for using journal articles, but needing at least six weeks' advance notice to the librarian who works with the materials). This shouldn't be confused with generating a syllabus that contains all salient information—not just office numbers and email addresses, a good syllabus has learning objectives, books and ISBNs, a plagiarism policy, a clearly defined attendance policy (I consider a student absent if they are more than 15 minutes late, and can fail a student for more than four absences), and a full chronology of the course, including any “homework” expected of them. Any papers being assigned with specific thematic concerns should best be explicated in the syllabus. Finding time to copy all of the syllabi—which means delivering paper copies to the Copy Center with a week's notice—means coming in to the office a week or two before the semester starts. Of course, if your office has been moved (often not for the first time—usually to accommodate a new, tenure-track hire), you might have come in a month or two before the semester started in order to find space in your new office (a desk, maybe a

shelf on a bookcase—but don't leave any anthologies unlocked, since "someone" will sell them to a used-book buyer and you'll find yourself without the text and teaching Dante that day). Your office might have three other adjuncts—or ten, or thirty. You might never see your office mates, or you might sit in the office with four of them, all potentially with students, or on the phone. There are no posted rules, but the standing principle seems to be to ignore the conversations between your peers and their students, and to take your cell phone calls outside (your office might have a phone, but you probably don't know the extension, and anyone who calls is looking for a professor who is no longer employed or alive). You try not to mention that you are a graduate student among those adjuncts who have already graduated—they are trying to make ends meet in different ways than you are (often by teaching at two or three campuses, sometimes commuting two hours to do so). When your officemates tell each other to go to hell (because of a loud phone call, or because they monopolize the one computer twelve of you share), you try to keep your head down and stay out of it. When three of your office mates are not renewed, and complain about how corrupt your department is, you (try to) keep out of it. And did I mention that the office has no window, no air flow (other than a generic table fan, with three settings), and that your hallway averages 80 degrees, year-round?

None of this prepares you for the day-to-day of teaching. Classes are 75 minutes long, and I generally try to hew to five sections of fifteen minutes each class. In composition class, business and free-writing are the first, followed by discussion of the free-writing, segueing into reflection on that day's reading, which kicks off a two-section sequence of

group work, all of which is meant to scaffold that day's discussion onto prior class-work. In a literature class, there is no free-writing (which I generally restrict to writing classes), so more time is often spent on group work and Q&A on the reading assignment for that day (when reading Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, Genet's *Querelle* or Ellis' *American Psycho*, for instance, questions of sanity, chronology, and psychology emerge that demand discussion time). A sample group work might emanate from discussion questions in the text—for *Oedipus*, I assigned the five groups a study question from our textbook/anthology, which they needed to craft into a short paper and present to the class, then follow up with discussion on our Blackboard bulletin board. In addition to constantly responding to bulletin board postings, I also needed to track that each student was making multiple posts, and flag those who were not, in an effort to bolster their flagging participation grades (which always seem to be questioned, when low, if you do not inform the student that they are not participating, no matter how obvious it should seem to a student that they aren't opening their mouth in class, or typing at the bulletin board). I prepared lectures for my medieval/early modern section (which often took hours of prep time for each), but when I realized that my 8:15am was not listening, I discarded the lectures, beginning to improvise conversation based on the reading, and eventually developing group activities that explored the eroticism of Sir Gawain and questioned the legitimacy of Christopher Columbus' voyage narratives (confirming one of my recurring themes is to question truth in autobiography).

To see my work rate, you'd think I was rich—making over \$50 per hour for teaching. Of course, this rate only paid for time spent in the classroom, so the average literature class

that semester paid a bit over \$2400. A writing class got paid an “extra” hour, bringing up the salary to over \$3200. It is not uncommon to hear adjunct graduate students discuss Medicare benefits, or to hear that a colleague has quit to become a wait-server or a temp. As an adjunct, you are not guaranteed employment from year to year—but if you are offered reappointment for the next year, you are not eligible for unemployment benefits over the summer. To get health insurance at my school, you needed to teach at least two courses per semester—and every semester—and then wait a year to be eligible. Course prep was not reimbursed—nor registration at conferences (let alone transportation), nor extended office hours, nor time spent emailing students (or responding to their emails), nor copies over your allotment of 250 for the semester. Adjuncts do not become rich, or even working-class; they hover near poverty.

There are magazines designed to help ease the burden of the adjunct, with tips on dealing with “high maintenance” students, indifferent administrators, and union bargaining skills, among others promising to alleviate adjuncts’ stress levels. Reading such periodicals provokes such inspiration in me: to strive not to become a permanent adjunct. A love of teaching is one thing, but suffering at the hands of (and often railing against) universities (increasingly run as businesses) make no sense to me from a lifestyle perspective. We teach for many reasons, but if we are unable to find employment that can support us, we shouldn’t teach. Perhaps if many adjuncts left the industry (withholding the labor supply that keeps demand low, and wages lesser), the goals of a living wage would be achieved by the resolute union reps in perpetual negotiations for the next contract.

I don't want to feel that tired, old, or gastrointestinal every semester for the rest of my life; it is up to me to ensure that it doesn't happen.

December 12, 2006 10:05am

No desire to be here, again, but it is the last day. I am looking to gauge the reactions from my students to the shadings I brought to each class, so I am asking for anonymous feedback that I will not consider until after grades are submitted. I am giving each student a blank piece of white paper and letting them write unmitigated remarks about their feelings—what they liked, didn't like; how they suggest I should do it differently; whether I was a demagogue, scoundrel, or sweetie, etc. I don't plan to look at them until a little time has settled on the semester, but it is giving me something to look forward to, and some closure with them in a few weeks.

In closing off *Twelfth Night*, I brought up the importance of gender and performance throughout the class—emphasizing that making connections between Viola and Lady Bertilak is important to the structure of how I taught it, as well as hinting to essay possibilities on the final. I reviewed the structure of the final in the first twenty minutes, which brutally punished the dozen who strolled in close to 9. I feel for Malvolio at the end; he only wants a better station than the one he was born to, and he achieves neither love nor his ambitions. Jacob suggested that perhaps Antonio and Malvolio hooked up at the end—thus giving everyone, save Andrew, somebody to love. That thought chastens me, however improbable it is. I'm so tired, and so haunted today, that unlikely happy endings make me want to be romantic, if only for a moment. I keep seeing my mother's

corpse—the unadorned body, as she looked twenty hours after death: so cold and pallid, with decay beginning to show under her fingernails, and with the passing of this morning’s class died one of the last spaces in which she was still alive. I’ve been clinging to these classrooms, where my mother is not dead because I haven’t uttered a phrase that declares it to be true and so in these self-designated spaces—my classrooms—she is still alive because I will it so. And now that each classroom is closing, she is dying again, because I have no more spaces to revive her in. Her corpse keeps appearing to me, and I mourn again, anew, and I am suffering. Funny that I taught *Twelfth Night* today when I am so clearly having a *Hamlet* moment.

Comment

J. L. Austin’s *How to Do Things With Words* discusses the ways in which performative utterances (such as “I now pronounce you man and wife”) demonstrate power that is executable by the speaker rather than the words individually. Certainly when coupled with concerns about hegemony and interpellation in the classroom, a desire to performatively utter one’s mother back to life can be seen as less demagogic or ethically questionable than some concerns expressed (such as those of Mary Elliott).

December 19, 2006 9:30pm

I’ve been here a really long time—although I only assigned one final exam (administered at 8:30 this morning to the medieval/early modern class), I am required by New York law to “have class” in the designated final exam period, even if I give no exam. So, I have been here all day, standing in the classrooms, now empty, while students brought late work or just stopped in to say hello, and grading papers and exams, trying to get the

business end of this semester done. I write each composition student a letter that responds to their portfolios—the letter addresses some aspect of what they personally said to me in the introduction to their portfolios, as well as making global pronouncements about what a journey we've been on. I think I spend longer on my letter than some students do on theirs, but I try not to dwell on that likelihood.

The fallout of grading is taking a toll on me, particularly in the medieval class, which did very poorly on the final exam, despite it being “open notebook.” I even spent bits of the final class detailing what they could expect on the exam—right down to telling them outright to review prior quizzes for questions that might reappear. The highest raw score was 74.5 (low was 15.5)—I curved by multiplying by 1.28, to create a high mark of 95, and then distributed that 28% bonus to all scores, which created some As, but still left many students failing the exam. I've spent much of today examining each student's grades throughout the semester, trying to assign “fair grades” that reflect the body of work; it's tiring. I am a tough grader throughout the semester, so thinking through the letter grade at the end also reflects my own exacting standards in grading versus the grading expectations of my students, which matter.

On a related but unpleasant note, a student in the medieval class clumsily decided to plagiarize the bulk of her final paper, hoping to boost her grade (ironically, she did well on the Final, and even an average final paper still would have yielded her a B range grade). I knew something was amiss when she hovered on handing the paper in, and then “checked in” at midday to see if I'd graded the paper—it's as though she was waiting to

be caught. It's crushing my spirits even more to fail her, but at this stage in the semester, there isn't another option. She made a bad decision; I can only hope that based on her behavior after committing the crime, she will feel the sting of the F and never make that choice again.

Comment

Throughout this semester I've been taking a course on "Stars" to complete my own graduate education. I've been taking under advisement Sondra Perl's ideas on composing yourself into your material, and thinking about the future of the academy in composition and rhetoric. How many times can we muse on punctuation? Can we reread Elbow and Bartholomae's conversations for each successive generation? My thought relates back to some of the works I've read by mid-career professionals dealing with the learning process in personal terms—Alice Kaplan's *French Lessons* particularly captures this—and I have considered ways I can edit myself into my work more. Certainly in keeping this journal I have seen the ways spectral entities can emerge within even the most focused writing project, and it seems all the more relevant to encourage our academy to accommodate more voices—and, in Fulwiler's terms, amplified, authentic voices.

Edgar Morin's *The Stars* encapsulates Hollywood's star system, and while the fifty-year-old work is dated in ways, its understanding of the psychology of projection that develops in our adoration of stars is still resonant. Earlier I included a piece about "myself" that fictionalized myself as an actor on a reality series *being myself* living through actual events that happened in the aftermath of my mother's passing. Morin considers the ways

in which we narcissistically identify with actors: “even as all self-love conquers love of others, in an individualist civilization like ours, in which love is also egoism, all love of others implies self-love” (81). I would like to consider then that any forms of projecting one’s self into an astral position is a form of self-love (perhaps ego-driven) that can be remediating and even reparative. The melodramatic gestures of the grieving are not meant to be self-aggrandizing, but rather a relief of intense pain; still, we learn such gestures from great stars, and the people who emulate them (witness drag and its connection to great gesticulators like Joan Crawford and Bette Davis). Adam Frank has noted that “shame is the affect that most accommodates and gives body to performativity in both its theatricalizing and deconstructive senses” (521). I’ve mentioned before that I have made presentations on the uses of collective group experiences to create new “scripts” that mitigate shame (in particular, I’ve written about gay male identity and viewing *All About Eve*). It is not simply in mediating shame that script development can be so useful, but also in developing an authentic voice (even one that utilizes “inauthentic” gesticulation). That paper endeavored to speak in a professional voice, concerned particularly with the works of Christopher Bollas, D.W. Winnicott, and Melanie Klein. In revisiting this film, and my relationship to it, I made a point of writing in a style that not only considered my own authentic voice, but also the possibilities of composing ourselves into our work. Embracing your own “star moments” is a component of creating your pedagogical style, and your classroom persona. The piece is indebted to Wayne Koestenbaum’s essay, “200 Women,” which uses a similar structure, and demonstrates ways in which life writing (and celebrity life writing) can be made absolutely relevant to the academic writing expected of the nascent professor when he is

no longer fledgling. I read a draft of this paper (which follows here) on December 15, 2006, at the last class meeting of “Stars,” and it was a denuding experience that left me bereft all weekend (and influenced the precariousness of my emotional state in writing my last journal entry). Intensely personal work can (and should) affect our teaching, and intensely personal teaching can (and should) affect our work (witness Sondra Perl’s *On Austrian Soil*).

Connecting me to Margo, through Bette Davis

1. The first Bette Davis film I ever saw was not *All About Eve*—that was third. The first was *Burnt Offerings* (a title I’m still not sure I understand), a 1976 gem with Karen Black and Oliver Reed as a married pair who rent a gorgeous Victorian house from creepy Burgess Meredith and Oscar-winner Eileen Heckart.² I was nine years old, and stayed up past bedtime to watch this flick, on Channel 9’s Sunday night movie, after the late news and Siskel & Ebert, at 12:05am. In an era without imdb.com or Netflix, I knew nothing about this film (other than the tantalizing fifteen-second commercial that had aired a day or two earlier—with ominous music and Bette Davis, looking old and chipper, in the back of a car,

² Heckart won her Oscar for 1972’s *Butterflies are Free*, playing Edward Albert’s overbearing but loving mother, who interferes in his relationship with ditzy Goldie Hawn. Heckart had lost the Golden Globe to Shelley Winters, for her spectacularly campy work as overweight swim champion Belle Rosen in my favorite childhood disaster film, *The Poseidon Adventure*. One reason the absurd flick was so favored was because of Winters’s uncanny vocal and physical resemblance to my maternal grandmother, Helen Dunfey, who also seemed slurred and blurry to me throughout my childhood. I imagined her looking like Winters in her youth, and often when I watch Shelley Winters’s films today, I see my grandmother—being mean to Sidney Poitier in *A Patch of Blue* and being drowned by Monty Clift in *A Place in the Sun*. I try not to hold any of this against Eileen Heckart, especially since all of them are quite dead now.

approaching a creepy Victorian manor much like those in my New Hampshire neighborhood). It seems inconceivable now that I would be more attracted to that house than to Bette or the campy Karen Black, but, truth is, the house sucked me in. The house provided me a sense of continuity of place to my own life—a holding environment that Bette Davis would later provide for me. The film, alas, is forgettable—Karen goes bonkers and “becomes” Burgess and Eileen’s dead aunt, while the rest of the family is killed off in dull manner. Bette dies early—I don’t even remember how, just that it seemed rather unceremonious that this woman—this famous Bette Davis—was dispatched in such a blasé style.

2. Davis and Eileen Heckart appeared together again in the 1980 TV movie, *White Mama*, in which Davis is an old lady who lives in a black neighborhood and takes on a maternal relationship with a young child, with some fallout. The nuns showed it to us in Catholic grade school; it strikes me now as incredibly daring, but it was certainly an improvement over the usual fare, like *Space Camp* or *The Neverending Story*. Heckart played a bag lady. The film is not available on video or DVD anymore, though I am sure there is a petition for that purpose somewhere.
3. Eileen Heckart was nominated for an Oscar for her supporting work in *The Bad Seed*, for which she had won the Golden Globe and was the favorite to win the Oscar. Alas, in one of those Oscar campaigns that defy explanation, she lost to Dorothy Malone’s breathy, camp performance in Douglas Sirk’s *Written on the Wind*. Malone’s final screen performance was as Hazel Dobkins in *Basic Instinct*, a film that baffled me. I did not see it in the theatre, for in March, 1992 I was

sixteen years old, and the South Willow 7 was strictly enforcing the R rating—and I didn't dare ask my mother to go see *Basic Instinct*. Malone's character is the patron saint of the film—hyperblond, cool, and maternal to the hypersexed lesbian pair of Sharon Stone's Catherine and Leilani Sarelle's Roxy. The film's only non-blonde, Jeanne Tripplehorn's police psychiatrist, Beth, is also the one female lead who ends up dead. Bette was already dead when the film was made, but she would never have fit in—her brand of glamour is antithetical to blonde.

4. Bette's performance in *White Mama* lost the 1981 Emmy to Patty Duke, playing the Anne Bancroft role in a TV remake of *The Miracle Worker*. (Patty's co-star, Melissa Gilbert, mysteriously submitted as a lead against Patty and Bette, joins Bette in the Loser's Circle). Patty's original performance as Helen Keller in the 1962 theatrical version won her the Supporting Actress Oscar, beating one of the great screen performances in history—Angela Lansbury (at 36, playing mother to 34 year old Laurence Harvey) as Mrs. Iselin in John Frankenheimer's legendary Cold War thriller, *The Manchurian Candidate*. My dad and I watched *The Manchurian Candidate* in a hotel room at a Hilton in Mobile, Alabama on the night before my test and interview for the *Jeopardy!* Teen Tournament, in November, 1989. We had jambalaya and gumbo at dinner—probably one of the last “meaty” meals I ever ate; after reading Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, I became a vegetarian on New Year's Day, 1990. Dad still remembers the trip as one of the best weekends of his life—just him, me, Alex Trebek, a failed test, and sharing a common love of that creepy, fantastic thriller (albeit he prefers Sinatra and I prefer Lansbury—insert your own conclusions here).

5. For most years of my adolescence I watched Lansbury play Jessica Fletcher on CBS's long-running Sunday-night mystery drama *Murder, She Wrote*.

Oftentimes this was because after-dinner coffee had dragged on too long at my grandparents' Sunday family dinner, and my grandmother (who fancied herself to look like Angela Lansbury) would insist we all stay and watch (the program with) her. My grandmother's erroneous beauty beliefs notwithstanding (she far more resembled Oscar winner and Reagan ex-wife Jane Wyman than Lansbury, but since we never visited on Friday nights, it was impossible for us to watch *Falcon Crest* with her and compare resemblances), it became a Sunday ritual for me. Eventually Mom admitted to me that she, too, was addicted, and it became a shared guilty pleasure in those distant days of my adolescence. (Years later, as the show began an interminable run on A&E in reruns, my mother would continue to watch, but to test herself to "remember" who did it, rather than deduce it for herself). Mom loved how many stars of yesteryear appeared on the series, particularly Steve Forrest, who seemed to play a different guest role every season, and whom my mother thought "a handsome older guy." Given her dating patterns after my parents were divorced, I probably could have traced her tastes back to those incomprehensible comments about Steve Forrest, and seen each successive boyfriend as an ersatz Steve Forrest, playing a different guest role each season. Among the zillion falling stars that guest starred on the series over its thirteen year run, Bette Davis was not.

6. Lansbury was nominated for an Emmy each year for her performance as Jessica Fletcher, and each year she lost. She has been nominated now twenty times

without winning—thirteen consecutively for *Murder, She Wrote*. Her losing streak was likened to that of daytime diva Susan Lucci, who was nominated eighteen times for her over-the-top work as the world’s shortest fashion model, Erica Kane, on *All My Children* before finally winning in 1999. Lucci often lost to rival Erika Slezak of sister soap *One Life to Live* (Slezak has won six times over three decades for her performance as regal heiress/newspaper publisher/multiple personality disorder sufferer Victoria Lord). Recently Victoria Lord was presented with a long-lost child (her second, for those keeping track). My mother always insisted that I watch ABC soaps for reasons she’s taken to the grave, and so I’ve watched *One Life to Live* and the others since in utero. I was born with *Ryan’s Hope* blaring in the delivery room. When Viki birthed her last child in 1986, Allison Perkins, a creepy coed and member of a local cult, stole one of the twins (don’t ask how Viki didn’t remember giving birth to two of them!) for reasons never quite established when the story was presented to audiences sixteen years later. Poor Allison was then in a coma for those interim years, during which she was presumably visited by her mother, Ruth—as played by Eileen Heckart.

7. Heckart was nominated for a Daytime Emmy in 1986 for her limited arc as Ruth Perkins on *One Life to Live*. One of her fellow nominees was Celeste Holm (like Heckart in *White Mama*, playing a bag lady on *Loving*), Bette Davis’s co-star on *All About Eve*. Holm and Davis didn’t much care for each other.
8. *All About Eve* was nominated for fourteen Oscars—the most in Hollywood history (if later tied by the technical wonders of *Titanic*). It won four—including

Best Picture. None of the women in the film won, although many were nominated. Davis and Anne Baxter faced off in Lead (the first time in Hollywood history two actresses from the same film competed together in that category); Celeste Holm and Thelma Ritter were both up in Supporting. Baxter and Holm had both won in Supporting in recent years (Baxter in 1946 for *The Razor's Edge* and Holm the following year for *Gentleman's Agreement*), and Baxter likely felt this was her opportunity to “move up” to the leading lady category. James Spada’s biography of Davis includes a quote from Joseph Mankiewicz on the Oscar situation: “Bette lost because Annie was nominated. Annie lost because Bette Davis ditto. Celeste Holm lost because Thelma Ritter was nominated, and she lost because Celeste ditto” (286). Easy for him to say—he won two Oscars that night (for Direction and Screenplay). It’s the stuff of legend to point out that Davis’s and Baxter’s legendary performances—as well as the legendarily weird work of Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard*—lost to Judy Holliday who played the quintessential “dumb blonde with a heart of gold” in *Born Yesterday*, a film that’s as dull as the Melanie Griffith remake is bombastic.

9. It’s only happened four times since that two women from the same film have been nominated for Lead Actress at the Oscars: 1959, *Suddenly, Last Summer*, Katharine Hepburn and Elizabeth Taylor; 1977, *The Turning Point* (an Oscar record 0 for 10 that night), Anne Bancroft and Shirley MacLaine; 1983, *Terms of Endearment*, MacLaine (again) and Debra Winger; 1991, *Thelma and Louise*, Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis. In all cases there was debate over whether one actress should go supporting in an effort to prevent a repeat of the Davis/Baxter

debacle; all lost except MacLaine (*part deux*), who was largely rewarded for putting up with the legendarily “difficult” Winger (and gossiping all over Hollywood about their many on-set fracas during her aggressive campaigning for the prize). Winger is also the only one of the group to have never won an Oscar. Although Susan Sarandon narrated the documentary *Stardust: The Bette Davis Story*, Bette Davis never made a film with any of those seven women. Still, they all share an Oscar night.

10. I live less than two blocks from Susan Sarandon. Recently, after unsuccessfully flirting with her longtime partner, Tim Robbins, in the Drama section of our local Barnes & Noble, I walked out at the same time as Robbins & Sarandon, and headed home two paces behind them. They discussed whether to see *Little Children* and where the kids were. I did my best to seem uninterested, lest there be cameras on us. When they turned onto their block, Susan Sarandon looked back over her shoulder—perhaps to see if I was still quasi-stalking them. I wasn’t, Susan. Sorry about that.
11. I’ve never believed the opening scenes of *All About Eve*—when we are introduced to the “star-struck” stalker Eve Harrington, and only Birdie, the faithful dresser, smells a rat in Eve’s sob stories. I suspect that an actress knows who is watching her—and particularly if the watcher is the striking Anne Baxter (drab rain coat and fisherman’s hat notwithstanding), stalking her every performance. Margo Channing and Bette Davis have too much cunning in them to be so easily swindled.

12. Bette starred in the first season of *Hotel*, which I rarely watched Wednesdays at 10pm on ABC, but was a huge favorite of mine. This was because ABC moved *Dynasty* to 9pm to accommodate the lavish companion series and since my bedtime was at 10pm, the new schedule allowed me to finally enjoy Fallon's bed-hopping antics and Alexis's bitchery. All thanks to Bette! Coincidentally, Bette fell ill early in the run of the series, and was forced to take a sabbatical. Eve Harrington replaced her, and Bette was not asked to return when she recovered.
13. During the second week of October 1989, many mourned the death of Bette Davis. She appeared on multiple magazine covers that were prominent in the Media Center (aka library) at John Stark Regional High School, but the cover that caught my freshman eye was *People*: Bette Davis, in an aubergine, off-the-shoulder gown, with the headline: "Defiant, dazzling." It would be years before I did the mental math to realize that this was the dress she wore in the famous "Fasten your seatbelts!" scene of *All About Eve*, but I was utterly transfixed by the sight. At the tender age of fourteen, the only Bette Davis I knew was an old lady in mediocre-to-bad films: *White Mama*, *Burnt Offerings*, *The Whales of August* (which I had not seen at that point in my life but had watched clips of on *Entertainment Tonight*, particularly as Leonard Maltin on that program campaigned successfully for an Oscar nomination for Ann Sothern in supporting—she lost to Olympia Dukakis for *Moonstruck*, which pleased me since I was working as a campaign aide for Michael Dukakis at the time). The vision of this Bette—defiant, dazzling Bette—compelled me to take action, however illicit. The sound of a tear, a rip, would shatter the precarious silences of

the Media Center—and Mrs. Amidala was a classically vigilant librarian, guarding the treasured silence with the zeal of Medusa. So, the next best thing was to photocopy the cover—but the rendering of Bette in black-and-white did not sate my nascent adoration. And so, with the stealth of a SCUD missile, I extricated the *People* from its protective library wrapping, and pocketed the magazine. It became a treasured possession, and a naughty reminder.

14. The day I stole Bette Davis from the library was a Friday, and I had a dentist appointment or something banal that required my mother to retrieve me early from school. My mother was tightly strung; my parents had been surreptitiously fighting during that Indian summer. They had recently reunited after a six-month separation—just in time to purchase this new house in a new town, which resulted in me being a total stranger in my new high school. They were not happy together, and I was not happy, in general. There was a cornucopia of reasons for their current sparring, but one concerned my upcoming test for *Jeopardy!* In the prior year, we had gone, as a family, to Philadelphia. My proud parents purchased me a Lorus watch with an octagonal face at the Main Line Lord & Taylor while I took my test at WPVI (it has long been broken, but I've always kept it as a memento of my first screen test). My mother shed some tears when I passed the test, and the entire ride back to New Hampshire was lined with praise and positive reinforcement. As I was inexplicably not selected in 1988 for the show, the new school year brought a new letter from *Jeopardy!* and after much *sturm und drang*, my father and I were slated to fly TWA to Mobile (changing planes in Memphis), without Mom or the boys. Given how much closer I was to

my mother than my father during their first separation, I was skittish and angry about this decision—I couldn't fathom that my mother would not want to go with me, and leave me with my father, who'd become such a stranger during their separation (he lived off éclairs and KFC—it seemed unimaginable). And on that Friday, squiring me to some dental appointment or something, the tension was high between me and my mother. The tension of Margo and Eve...

15. Instead of rushing home to watch *One Life to Live*, which neither of us would consciously miss during those halcyon days,³ we stopped at the local grocery store to pick up roast beef, Swiss cheese, and Nissen Canadian brown bread for a lunch for two. Stopping at the grocery store with Mom for cold cuts often meant a *détente* was in the air. While in the register line, my mother saw *People* in one of the magazine racks and commented on how sad it was that Bette Davis was gone, and how much she loved her acting style. My mother had acted in high school—commendation received for comedic timing at New England regionals—but had given up the craft to support her mother and siblings by working at the local box factory. Given the way she lit up when discussing her commedia dell'arte triumphs, and the inevitable sadness that followed, I don't think she ever quite got over her early abandonment of her avocation. My parents always claimed to be proud, but as I entered high school, my penchant for the limelight brought out their envy, as if each couldn't let go of his/her glory days as an actor, or a star student, or an athlete with dreams of "the pros." It's hard to blame

³ In the days following Viki and half of Llanview being locked in the underground city of Eterna, Viki "remembered" her first child, Megan, being born there, decades earlier. It was can't-miss, high camp television.

either; it's never easy to admit that your life is littered with regretted choices, let alone (re: Gloria Swanson / Norma Desmond) that the limelight has burned out.

16. With characteristic desire to please—at the risk of being exposed as a thief—I showed Mom the copy I had of *People*, which she noted had the return address of the high school. She asked if I had taken it. My head lowered, but after a moment, I returned her gaze, defiant and dazzling: “So what if I did?” She may have wanted to say “the right thing” as parent to child, but she chortled with belly laughs. She seemed to admire my moxie—perhaps even covet it. There was conversation and laughter that followed, but the important part, the reifying moment of the star, was when we went next door, to Video Library, and checked out *All About Eve*—the first of many Bette Davis films to get me through my adolescence. I laughed much harder than my mother, and watched with less bemusement and more study—of the bitchery, of the expressions, of the mannerisms. My mother wasn't good (when sober) at showing her reactions or her emotions, favoring a detached and deferential style that masked her naked ambitions and seething anger and rage (masks which dissipated once she'd sipped enough box wine). I've been the acid-tongued aging star for most of my young life—like Margo, so vulnerable to men, so vitriolic to my competition. At that moment of reconciliation—when I understood that she wasn't abandoning me with Dad (in Alabama, no less)—we also established how our imagined roles in that classic drama would mirror our own in life. When Mom tried to slap me eight years later at Disney World, I caught her arm and actually told her, “You're

too short for that gesture.”⁴ Poor Mom was too much an Eve—trying passively to coerce and manipulate, never forthright enough in her desires or her manners. Her attempts at sincerity had an outré residue, like the green stains left by her ersatz QVC jewelry. I gave her a copy of *All About Eve* for Christmas a few years ago, but among her personal effects found in the days after her demise, that movie remained wrapped in plastic. If only she could have seen it the way I see it—as the Margo, not the Eve. I said many things to my mother’s lain-out corpse that August, 2006, but the last thing I left her with before her body left us was a crumpled *People* magazine cover. She needed it more than I did.

17. I finally passed the *Jeopardy!* tests (just before Mom’s last birthday), and she was so excited by the possibility of finally watching me on the long-running series, after so many years since those Teen Tournament dreams had gone bust. Though I lost spectacularly, the real goal was to shimmer in high definition—defiant, dazzling to the core. Moments of conventional stardom come and go, but true stardom is Bette Davis, sucking on a cigarette, older than God, plugging some TV movie on Johnny Carson, totally aware that she is being watched, adored, and listened to. I try to shimmer every day.

Quien es esa niña? Who’s that girl?

“What can we make of those kisses, given to Bertilak by Gawain acting like a woman?

Gawain acts like a woman. The structure of identity—gender identity, sexual identity,

⁴ Yes, it’s George Sanders’s line, but he is the one character in the entire enterprise that gets exactly what he wants—and on his own terms. If lapsed Catholics can be pick and choose à la “cafeteria” about picking and choosing from the tenets of that zany religion, then I can be a cafeteria mimic when it comes to stealing from *All About Eve*.

Christian chivalric identity (which partakes of both gender and sex)—is threatened in these narrative moments” (211). I’ve spoken before of Carolyn Dinshaw’s influential *Getting Medieval*, but I wish to be clear that it is not only significant to reconceiving the Middle Ages through postmodern lenses, but also to reconsidering self-image and the “dangers” inherent in perception in the modern classroom. In that Paul Lynde vein, it is entirely possible to perform in queer ways without explicitly defining yourself as such. Wit, glamour, bitchery—the stock and trade of Bette Davis can be the professor’s weapons, subterfuges, subtle ploys, and refuges (sometimes all at once). I am reminded again of William Pinar’s line, “From behind we are all women” and this dangerous fetishization of the queer body as somehow feminized (and not necessarily in a “good way”). I am still utterly dubious about Gallop’s phallogocentric seduction-as-pedagogy notion, and my vigilance about restrained pedagogy reflects what I have noted earlier: that constant awareness of hegemony and interpellation in our classrooms would border on paranoid reading if there wasn’t a need to be so aware of our power dynamics, and the need to empower our students.

So what happens when the cautious queer professor is concomitantly an *agent provocateur* with a flair for explicitly queer readings—in his work as a student, and his work as an academic? Is it a tenable place? I suspect the answer is centered on time: as we begin our careers, and our development of pedagogical stances, we have the luxury of being “an unknown.” My students may be able to read some of cultural codes I am emitting, but they do not have the luxury of Googling me to see what my publication history says about my interests (and my interests are revealing: Genet, Bette Davis group

therapy sessions, queer pedagogies, autobiographical life writing as academic, theoretical space). I reject what I paraphrase here as to be seen as “someone’s woman (from behind),” but I recognize that, in writing a deeply autobiographical, deeply queer-inflected work like “Connecting me to Margo,” I am blowing Gawain’s kisses to Bertilak, shifting identities from teacher to academic, professor to student, phallogocentric daddy to grieving son. I noted in a journal entry on November 2 that I felt no obligation to be an “out” teacher—and that largely emanates from a need to keep my sexual performativity and sex life out of the classroom (necessarily). Nonetheless, my queer subjectivity and subject position are relevant—organically emerging from the impromptu karaoke of Madonna songs I am known to break into mid-class (always to underscore a point), or the predisposition to schedule *Querelle* on the syllabus for composition students, or the shimmering “star moments” that come from attention to personal detail—lighting, good hair, a great pair of shoes. Joan Crawford had swathes of extra light bathe her 60-year-old face in *Berserk*, in an effort to preserve the sanctity of her stardom through such attention to how she was perceived by her “fans.”

Losing on *Jeopardy!* (a crushing blow to my ego, and to my obligations to my mother to deliver a Hallmark-card “happy ending”) was mitigated by the knowledge that I looked good—that I shimmered in high-definition. Whether an attention to “star appearance” reflects a queer subjectivity is debatable, but it does reflect my performance in the classroom. And as I grow and develop as a scholar, so, too, will my body of work become a queer *corpus* to be picked over and exposed by my students and colleagues alike. And as I pay attention to the quality of my shoes, so will I also pay attention that

my work reflects my identity as “truthfully” and fearlessly as possible. Not explicitly “coming out” in the classroom is not a question of closets or politics—I will continue to develop and expand the discursive spaces for my personal expressions. The development of “strange readings” allows for expressing an explicitly queer subject matter through my writing, my personal compositions, while balancing with the obligations of the teaching professional who must design a classroom around his “star moments.” My classroom is designed for the edification and growth of my students. Embracing your own “star moments” is not just about performing as a writer, or as a professor: it is also about letting your co-stars shine, and giving them a strong performance to respond to. Writing essays that expand your field—and express the strength of your personal development and character in ways celebrating stardom and autobiography alike—directly correlate to the health of your classroom, since your energetic, passionate performance will elicit the best work they can do.

August: Recursiveness

Days ago I was finishing up an abbreviated (eight week) summer session of English 101. I've taught 101 a few times in the nearly two years since that semester in purgatory with my mother and Dante, and I am always revising the syllabus—eliminating Deborah Blum's "The Gender Blur," for instance, because I often spend too long rephrasing the dense ideas for my students, rather than focusing on their responses to Blum's nuanced work. Instead of reflecting on Blum, I have replaced that reading with a class session to review appropriate uses of their/they're/there and the T-E-A method of paragraph and essay organization and development. I finished teaching this summer with an exhortation to my students to not only develop their perspectives and expand their point-of-views (or even just have one), but also to think about scaffolding. Architecture is easy—metaphors about buildings with shaky foundations litter mediocre job interviews—but scaffolding takes specific thought about improvement and unsightliness. Scaffolding can be unpleasant—exposing the unpleasantness concomitant with fixing an edifice—but it ultimately takes an entity and develops it more fully. In Composition, the scaffold is perched firmly on developing voice and core structure in essay development. It does not tear down what is already there, but builds on and around the renovated space. I'm reminded of the Deborah Britzman quote from *After Education* that I mentioned in the Prologue: humans work their breakdowns and their repairs in very similar ways, depending on the work of memory and recursiveness as much as the restorative works of genera and healing. In order to continue developing and healing alike, I am thinking quite recursively now. Two years to the weekend when she and I last spent time here, I am rustivating at my mother's cottage on a small pond in Massachusetts. I am alone with

my year-old Jack Russell puppy, Toby—a clever kid raised in the city, now utterly transfixed by the freedom and languor of the forest. Conversations from that last time with Mom—and indeed, from my whole life—reverberate here for me. It is where my grandmother is interred, and where, in a few days, my brothers and I will inter my mother. It is the place where my mother—a woman who chose to marry my father instead of attending college on full scholarship, but with a capacious knowledge of literature and the arts—and I discussed this project: the intentions, the syllabus preparation, the structure itself. If she assisted me, then, in the design and architecture of this project (and infused a dollop of grief by dying before I could implement it), then this epilogue is about revisiting and redressing. Coming back here fits with the ideas Meena Alexander has recently articulated in “Writing Space” about finding space to write (although she discusses the excitement of arriving in New York, and I need to leave my adopted hometown to finish this); writing can be done anywhere, which is why choosing one’s space is so symbolically fulfilling. Revisiting the spirits on Curlew Pond brings me back to the roots of this project.

In the Prologue I consider the importance of what I termed “non-demagogic teaching” and extol a “supple” pedagogy. I’ve certainly learned from keeping this journal, and from making comments while reflecting on the journal, that pedagogy is (or should be) fluid. In documenting my own pedagogical space at the beginning of my academic career, I am establishing a baseline document that will be under constant scaffolding as I reassess and respond to my classrooms, my students, and my texts. My pedagogy will respond to my life, much as this document responded to my mourning. I doubt I’ll ever

stop mourning her; indeed, I still yearn to speak to her, even if just to gossip about work dramas and family turmoil. In that last weekend, my mother told me that she still picked up the phone to call her mother (who'd been dead 13 years at that point). I understood her then, but now, intrinsically, I understand. Pedagogy is fluid. Wisdom is fluid, too. Mourning is fluid, too. Fluidity has a different molecular design than suppleness, but the principles are still basically the same: avoid rigidity and maintain a willingness to go with the flow (but against the heteronormative). One moment in which I put this to practice occurred earlier this summer. I taught a Margaret Atwood text, but a funny thing happened when I told my usual anecdote about meeting her: I forgot the punch line. A student surmised from the way I was telling it that Atwood was not friendly to male students, and while I tried to guide the class back toward a central position—one that allowed for each student to make his/her own decision about the article's relevance based on their own perspective/POV, I forgot Atwood's own line (and my punch line): "Well, the girls will understand it." I stammered for a spell, and then I shrugged my shoulders and said, "Oh well! It must not be that important anyhow." The class then collectively resumed fearing the impending portfolio grading, making impassioned requests for extensions based on traffic jams, paper shortages, or sick aunts (in other words, resuming business as usual). It made no impact on their lives that I failed to deliver the punctuation on my anecdote and, ultimately, it made none on mine. The moral: rote recitation (whether in anecdote or in the classroom) does not inspire response. Going with the flow saves flubbed anecdotes, and it is the cornerstone to preventing the ossification of ideas into unyielding teaching pedagogies.

In preparation for a course on World Literature I am teaching in the fall, I am reading Atwood's new collection of stories, *Moral Disorder*. I feel like her Miss Bessie, an English teacher disciplined in structure, order, and perspective. The narrator, recalling episodes from her life, thinks of Miss Bessie fondly, but also as part of a mutual past—last year's teacher, last year's student. No matter how attached I become or how recursive I may be with my students, they will (as I will) become past tense, to be relived with horror or delight as seen fit. Atwood's narrator tells about an "other place" where she keeps subconscious treasures and details the fleeting days of her youth and her mother's passing with unflinching candor and humanity. Recursiveness in the teaching profession is necessarily meta-, since we not only look to the past for our bedrock experiences and the wisdom of the academy, but we are (presumably) remembered by our former students as they move forward.

Didion wrote near the end of *Magical Thinking*, and I echo: "I realize as I write this that I do not want to finish this account. Nor did I want to finish the year. The craziness is receding but no clarity is taking its place. I look for resolution and find none" (224-5). Looking back is not about endings—are there any in the teaching process?—but rather about recurring, looking for continued progress. Mourning mirrors the writing process, too. Recursiveness is constant when you mourn, and it contributes to the evolution of our pedagogy as we not only look back to our teaching, but also "confront" the evidence of our work: interacting with our students after they cease being our students. Marty—the student who failed 101 and inadvertently re-enrolled in my section, creating a small first-day scene—would eventually seek me out again, enrolling in a summer literature class I

taught last year. He aced the class, and wrote me a note thanking me for being tough on him—it was a turning point for him. I saw Marius over this past summer, walking down the street wearing a very fashionable beret; he grinned broadly when he saw me, and while the beret didn't jibe with my memories of the hulking student, the warm conversation we had on the sidewalk made me wonder if, perhaps, he'd enjoyed my class more than he'd shown that semester. Lana took another class with me—and would constantly fill me in on gossip about her friends who were once my students. Finally, and hauntingly, Antwan continues to smile at me when I see him in the hallway. I've never quite recovered from the feeling that I failed him—that I should have been able to save him from the plagiarism hole he dug himself into with his “friends.” Darius has become an object I carry with me—a good one? a bad one?—when I enter the classroom; like my mother, or any of the other things I carry, he is a spectral energy when I teach—a reminder to be cognizant of my students' needs, their capabilities, and their vulnerabilities. Darius will grow up, and maybe he'll remember me fondly, but he'll always be with me as a young man with enormous potential and a generous smile that I wish I had done more for. If my education (both as a student and a professor) can be metaphorized as a “mental house” (pace Cicero), then the specter of Darius is safely lodged there.

Near the end of the classes that Fall, I asked my students to write anonymous feedback (on blank sheets of white paper) that would give me frank comments on the class, unfettered by the institutional model of rating classes (with pencils, standardized forms, numerical rating systems, etc.) I told them it was optional—and indeed, many blank

sheets were put in the envelope—and that I would not read the comments until after I’d finished grading. As it turns out, I did not open the envelope until this summer, when I found the sealed envelope in a box of materials earmarked for comment in this final chapter. The comments are not terribly instructive (lots of “Thanks for being nice” mixed with “There’s too much work,” and the occasional “You suck because I hate group work” or “I thought you were shady”) but they bring back the energies of the semester quite vividly, and much of the address is tender and time-specific. Although the text of their comments is not terribly incisive, and therefore not of much pedagogical use, I’m certainly willing to see that each note is a reminder of the unconventional and esoteric writing students are capable of (in much the same vein Hull and Rose have written about, which I discussed in “Intersections”). Each note is significant because it is written with a unique handwriting—a reminder of the individuality of every student, and a reminder of why I teach: to try and improve the writing and thinking of each student who passes through my classroom.

My thoughts on plagiarism have continued to evolve, like my pedagogy, with suppleness and attention to the individuality of each case (indeed, the ways I handled Corinna, Antwan, Arthur, and Tommy varied individually even within the semester). Rebecca Moore Howard and Amy Robillard have recently edited a collection, *Pluralizing Plagiarism*, which seeks to expand the spaces in which we consider plagiarism—the ethics of tenured faculty “borrowing” the work of their graduate students is given attention, for instance, while many authors state what seems rather obvious: plagiarism needs attention on a case-by-case basis. Robillard’s earlier article, “We Won’t Get

Fooled Again: On the Absence of Angry Responses to Plagiarism in Composition Studies,” persuasively argues that anger is needed in order to enforce not only the severity of the punishment for committing plagiarism, but also for disciplinary integrity, as we think of our role in teaching students to write who will then also write outside our discipline. Sean Zwagerman’s “The Scarlet P: Plagiarism, Panopticism, and the Rhetoric of Academic Integrity” reflects on his regrets over failing a student for plagiarism and notes, among other even-handed points about academic integrity (and the rhetoric about it), that in our quest for vigilance (and vengeance), we begin to lose trust. I’ve never regretted it when I have been angry over a case of plagiarism: it has gotten the point across to the transgressing student that this is a personal affront, as well as a serious institutional offense. Still, I see Zwagerman’s point about how emotion can affect our responses to students. It is always a moment of sadness when I read a fine sentence, become alarmed that it may be plagiarized, and then investigate, fruitlessly. I feel empty—concomitantly because my investigation has borne no fruit and because I have suspected my student, with whom I have developed this presumably productive relationship. The fickleness of emotions can dictate terms in a classroom, or in the aftermath of a semester (witness Antwan). Laura Micciche’s book *Doing Emotion* effectively documents the ways in which emotion has been discouraged in the academy, and records ways in which emotion can be brought into the composition classroom via planned exercises meant to rehabilitate what she terms “composition’s wound culture.” This culture speaks in similar terms to hooks and Rose/Hull’s work about how we bring different cultural, racial, and class-related baggage into the classroom, and that the composition classroom can be particularly scarring in this vein. A vigilant attention to

the way we express emotion (and the identity formations of each student) can prevent such scarring, without undermining the seriousness endemic to the anger over plagiarism.

In the two years that have passed since I wrote my teaching journal and devised this project, much has been written relating to the themes I've explored here. Has its unique qualities but it is hardly alone in thinking about mourning in the classroom. Jeffrey Berman's *Dying to Teach: A Memoir of Love, Loss, and Learning* tracks his experiences in teaching books about death (such as Anna Quindlen's *One True Thing*) while integrating writing assignments on death and dying—all the while mourning his wife. Dying is esoteric, as is mourning, but it is universal. Jose van Dijck's *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age* addresses the ways diaries and lifelogs are “deployed to scaffold individual memory, funnel emotion, and create affect” in ways as divergent as teenagers developing identity and Alzheimer's patients struggling not to forget their identities; writing the self, as I have discussed in Sondra Perl's work, is intrinsic to personal and professional growth (particularly as one *teaches* writing), but it also has potentiality to preserve and evolve the self. This project strikes me as doing work similar to what van Dijck describes at both extremes: it documents the development of a professional identity while also preserving memories of how my pedagogy germinated, lest I forget in the hubbub of professional and pedagogical evolution.

Faye Halpern's “In Defense of Reading Badly” considers the ramifications of identification in the ways our students read—and the ways in which they are culturally “taught” to approve or disapprove of the work based on their self-perceived

identities/identifications which, Halpern suggests, can be worked with to still produce valid interpretations (even if in conflict with the professor's notions). Halpern echoes the concerns of Gerald Graff in *Clueless in Academe* by suggesting that "in making explicit what we do in the discipline of English, we might be sacrificing our priestly aura, but that the loss is compensated by the increased competence and sense of belonging experiences by those new to our field" (571). I urge embrace of this idea—not only as one who eschews demagogic performance in front of the classroom, but as someone who wants to see an embrace of cross-disciplinarity and a place at the table for the generalist (Peters and Robertson's recent article on portfolios and WAC reminds us that the issues of writing—and writing programs—are not just about administration or performing "service to the university" but also about protecting writing as a site of disciplinary connection within programs and between programs). Donald E. Hall has noted in "Cluelessness and the Queer Classroom" that much of Graff's analysis of arrogant, disengaged academics is incompatible with what he terms "radical consciousness-raising" done by queer and feminist educators. I am troubled by the assumption that self-defining as a queer educator presumes a lack of arrogance and a predisposition to radical consciousness-raising; that said, Hall is successful in drawing our attention to the question of how we self-define when we read scholarship—and questioning the uses of that scholarship in our pedagogy. We should be willing to consider work we don't agree with (in much the same way I will address my remarks to a blatantly homophobic paper to the qualities of writing—and, generally, an exhortation to correct the internal flaws of logic in many such papers). James F. Slevin's recent article calling for a "universal" introductory English/writing class reflects the author's decades of experience, even as its assertions

about current educational efficacy (or lack thereof) and call for an inscribed, singular introduction to writing did provoke my enthusiastic disagreement. Jane Gallop's recent defense of close reading (which I was privileged to hear at the 2006 MLA convention, days after the end of the semester documented in this project) reminds me of the importance of supple pedagogy. No matter my distaste for Gallop's decades-old notions of seduction in the classroom, her call to consider close reading as an antidote to "the timeless and the universal" (186) makes sense to me; it shows an awareness of historicity and relativity in our classrooms while finding a way to take a traditional method and make it work with these "newer" ideas. Gallop's work makes me aware that we can continue to welcome new people to our fields (or a new person to multiple fields), as Halpern and Graff suggest, by continuing to impart our knowledge to each other and our students without the damage of dogma. Lee Edelman noted in a published roundtable on queer temporalities that by engaging with scholars brought together by similar interests (but not necessarily the same disciplines or areas), he is forced "to face up to the necessary consequences of their—and my own positions" (194). We must equally continue to engage positions similar and dissimilar to our own—not just for our own pedagogical growth, but also the growth of our academy. Much of this writing brings me back into relation with Althusser and the troubling ideas of interpellating our students through power systems defined by the heteronormative. Academic discourse should elicit healthy debate—and so should our lesson plans. Following in the ideas of Elbow's teacherless classroom and Sontag's critic showing *how* rather than defining *what*, we must be constantly vigilant to listen to and incorporate minoritized voices—even (or especially) when we perceive ourselves to be a minority. As I've demonstrated in my

survey of queer pedagogy, it is entirely possible to foreclose on members of your own community by indulging in the blame games of identity politics.

Erica McWilliam boldly states, “Powerful teaching is erotically stimulating” (228). I can’t speak for her teaching style, but I think the queer subject must be more careful about being stimulated erotically in the classroom (which I’ve discussed in context with Spurlin and Wallace earlier). A recent work with overlapping interests with the concerns I’ve expressed in this project is James McNinch’s “Queering Seduction: Eros and the Erotic in the Construction of Gay Teacher Identity.” McNinch considers the heightened expectations of integrity for the queer teacher because of the way his/her body is marked as an erotic space in the classroom. Ultimately he argues that “an element of seduction” is endemic to good teaching, but that it is often the students who do the seducing of the teacher by choosing to learn or not to (allowing the teacher to teach or to flounder in a state without authority). Naturally I am still loath to reconsider the phallogocentric arguments of Gallop et al about models of Western teaching, but I see that what McNinch is terming an element of seduction can also be termed an element of interpellation. Gaining the student’s trust and confidence is a necessary element to good teaching, but it also opens the student up to possible inculcation. Ultimately, we must self-police. Am I respecting each student? Am I listening to each student? Am I avoiding inappropriate contact with each student? These are the questions I consider when I think about my classrooms, and recognize that an element of seduction is appropriate, and an element of power is necessary. Grades are necessary, and they confer necessary power onto the professor. The ethical responsibility of each professor is to consider the wise disposition

of that power, in context with a teaching style that is not demagogic or humiliating to the student. The erotics of the classroom seem more theoretical than literal, but the dynamics of power are necessarily complicated by sexuality when the heteronormative structures of education are present. That students have power to disrupt the classroom by choosing not to learn is frustrating to the educator but necessary to avoid the hegemonic—even when the professor is queer (self-defined or perceived).

Similarly, we have the power to disrupt the maps of academic research by refusing to pigeonhole our work, or to narrowly self-define based on identity politics or area/temporal studies. There is much to be learned not by remapping ourselves into hemispheres or extended centuries, but by extending our sets of interests to include intersections, and by recertifying the generalist as a welcomed guest at the table. As I think I've demonstrated in this work, there are ways to think about teaching the medieval that incorporate the work of composition and rhetoric; there are ways I teach in composition that consider queer theory; and so on, and so on. We can do work that cross-examines our beliefs and our categorizations alike. This work questions traditional norms for academic writing, and pleads for consideration for life writing as an extension of Sondra Perl's notions of composing ourselves into our writing—without feeling as though we are inferior for doing so. When I read the essays of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Wayne Koestenbaum, I read the work of writers who could be called composition/rhetoric if they so desired; I also see that, in resisting such characterization, they encourage us to richly consider their work in a variety of contexts, and from a diversity of subjectivities. My work incorporates psychological analysis, queer theory,

medieval, composition and rhetoric, and classics teaching approaches, and nonfictional writings. It is not an affront to traditional academics to intersect across unusual boundaries; it is reconsideration, recursiveness, and reconciliation. We have too much important work to do, reaching out to increasingly fragmented student populations, to be restrictive on the form of our writing. I worry enough about interpellating and dominating the discourses of my students without worrying about whether the form of my writing is transgressive because I include my teaching journal as a research space, or because I work with creative nonfiction. As much as we must resist demagogic pedagogies in the classroom, we must also resist demagogic practices in hiring and publishing, too.

In reading the handwritten evaluations I elicited at the end of the semester, I discovered a recurring theme. A few students in the medieval/early modern class wanted to spend more time on Dante, complaining that it was given short shrift by my syllabus. In retrospect, I see that they were likely right. I had fears about teaching Dante that I expressed in the journal, and I recognize now that I have a distinct fear of Purgatory. A state of limbo, Purgatory is a place I was condemned to when my parents' marriage was annulled (although the Monsignor stressed to my parents that God has a "special consideration" for the innocent children of annulled marriages). I called this project *A Semester in Purgatory* because, I understood Purgatory to be a moment of torment, but a temporary one, because Purgatory is a "waiting room" for those to be called to Heaven. Mourning was, and continues to be, utterly purgatorial, but not necessarily as I believed it from my days in Catholic schools. Reading Dante gave me a new insight into Purgatory:

it is a transitive state. You enter Purgatory—on the far side of the world—and you work on improving your nature until you are pure enough to ascend another terrace (with each of the seven terraces representing a Deadly Sin to be purified within you). Finally, once you have done the hard work of purifying yourself of each sin, you ascend this mountain of terraces and await entry to Paradise. *The Divine Comedy* is still, as I complained about Dante before, so rigid and pompous, but it's a comforting analogy (and one far more pleasant than the state of limbo I was condemned to by a well-meaning Monsignor many years ago). Mourning is purgatorial in my original conception: a state of limbo, waiting to be emerged from. Now I see teaching is purgatorial (using the Dante model)—a constant series of tests, designed for perpetual self-improvement, with the dangling hope of eventually reaching Paradise. This journey documents one semester of Purgatory, but teaching is a constant purgatorial state, transiting students to improved thought, transiting teachers to enlightened practices, all of us searching for some self-defined version of Paradise. The process of teaching, like life, is not diegetic. It is constantly repeated, recursive, and reconsidered. I don't want to finish writing this, because this space is the last one in which my mother can exist in the present tense, but so long as I can refer back to these pages, my mourning will have borne fruit, and so long as I can remember her, she is present within me. I never want to finish a semester, but so long as I remember a smile, an improved sentence, an unexpected idea, that student is alive, too, within my memory house, or a corner of my heart, perhaps.

Pedagogy is fluid, teaching is performative, and not even purgatory is universal. I reflected on Peter Elbow's comments on democratizing writing in the Prologue by saying

that “writing belongs to everyone—even the bad writers.” “Bad” is not intrinsic but subjective—even in the “worst” writing is the spark of something personal, waiting to be examined, with the potential for revelation that a teacher can work with. An ending, then, from the double meanings and queer intersections of Oscar Wilde: “The story of mankind began in a garden and ended in revelations.”

Epilogue

Lauren Berlant recently noted that subjects are rarely shocked by their incoherence, and it's a point I have been trying to unpack in the context of my classroom. For all of the small-group, consciousness-raising work done in my classrooms, and the emphasis on developing voices, it is rare that a student seems truly shocked by his realizations, or his newly found writing or critical skills, or his changes of heart. It's important to think about how our students work in group settings, and succeed there. *The Economist* ran an article recently about how scientific examination of honeybee group investigations into prospective colony sites revealed that "the ability of the bees to identify quickly the best site depends on the interplay of bees' interdependence in communicating the whereabouts of the best site and their independence in confirming this information" (89). In other words, bees need each other to create communities, but need their independence to educate themselves in ways that create better communities. Reminiscent of Berlant & Warner's queer pedagogical aims of world building and culture making, the bees create new society by depending on each other's skills at discerning what is best for the whole, and recognizing their own incoherence is part of the process of being a subject in a larger community.

I'll leave it to the reader to determine my own incoherence or subjectivity throughout this journey; this epilogue serves largely to end the project with a few reminders and intellectual souvenirs to accompany the quite personal and elegiac reflections throughout the work. It's hard to let go of a project so personal, but it's also so hard to let go of one that defines my teaching and my psyche so clearly. I fear the appropriation and the loss

of my authority over my work, fear I expounded on in the “Intersections” chapter and continue to echo in my life. I’ve been thinking of the body as archive lately, but rather than considering body piercings and tattoos, I’ve been thinking about memory houses, and Melanie Klein’s notions of internal objects (good and otherwise). This work is archival, of course, but it also serves to remind me, and you, of Eliot’s “dark genera” and the ways we can create art from dark spaces, and thus also treat our wounds through the process. If this project can remind you that writing can be therapeutic as well as edifying, please let it do so.

There has been so much pondering of the term “demagogue” in the advent of Sarah Palin; it seems to me that much of the hue and cry has been aimed at the dumbing down of one’s self to preach doctrine that one knows to be untrue in order to lead masses by their prejudices and ignorance. Others can debate the extent and efficacy of Governor Palin’s demagoguery, but I’ll use this historical moment to reiterate the importance of eschewing all forms of demagoguery in the classroom. I’ve already drawn out the important connections between the work on queer pedagogy that emerged over a decade ago with my notion of nondemagogic pedagogy, and I hope that the emphasis I have placed on the development of all student voices represents a queer pedagogy that is less emphatic on a queer subject position and more emphatic on a commitment to diversity and inclusivity that transcends and intersects our variable differences. Avoiding hegemonic and heteronormative practices in the classroom requires vigilance and constant self-awareness—which can certainly be heightened by the journaling process, and by paying close attention to the comments of our students—during and after a semester. I’m

hopeful that this project underscores the importance of bearing witness, whether to our mourning or to our classroom (both authentic academic spaces), and considers the ways intersections can create fruitful discourse—whether in considering the psychological works of Winnicott, Bollas, and Klein in formulating classroom pedagogy, or considering how Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s work on Buddhist pedagogy intersects with Williams and Althusser in the deployment of a nondemagogic pedagogy.

I’m also hopeful that this work shows how it is possible to see our students as characters in our writing, but as three-dimensional in our assessment, our dialogues, and our teaching. The advent of the IRB necessarily limits how we depict these relationships, and, moreover, the identifying information about our students that would threaten their right to privacy. It is possible to love our students without blinders; they can be lazy. They can neglect their commitment to do their work. They can lie to us. They can and they do—all of these things, and more. It is not the work of writing about teaching to glorify our students, lest we be accused of not liking to teach, or not liking our students. We have enough challenges (some of which I have documented in the challenges of teaching as a graduate student and concomitantly as contingent faculty) without worrying that we must journal with rose-colored ink. That our students (can) have failings is a challenge for us to address, not to be ignored or dismissed. Furthering the work of queer & nondemagogic pedagogy, and thinking of the possibilities of the holding environment (for our classrooms and our writing), can only enhance our students and ourselves by encouraging thoughtful, honest communications.

Ultimately, as I mentioned in the Prologue, teaching is not diegetic. It starts before the semester, and it continues after the semester ends. The last chapter ruminates on the ways our students stay with us, our stance on issues changes over time and practice, and our journeys in Purgatory take us to unexpected terraces. I'm humbly hopeful that this work contributes to all the communities that depend on our cooperation and intellectual independence and that, like the works I have depended on and learned from, it will be revisited and benchmarked. In the spirit of the diegetic, I'm hopeful that this is the last word of the work, but not the end of the thinking so necessary to keeping our teaching, our research, and our industry renewed.

Appendix: Syllabi for three classes taught Fall 2006 at John Jay College

John Jay College of Criminal Justice
City University of New York
445 West 59th Street
New York, NY 10019

Fall 2006

Instructor: Rob Faunce
English 101: College Composition I Section 66
T/Th Period 6 3:35-4:50 pm
Classroom: 102 W
Office Hours: Tu/Th 9:30-10:15; 1:00-1:55

rfaunce@jjay.cuny.edu
professorfaunce@yahoo.com

Prereq: English 100 or equivalent
Office: 1258 N

Course Description: This class is designed to allow you to become more proficient at writing; more comfortable with expressing opinions in writing; and exposed to multiple perspectives around a specific theme (here, gender). Over fifteen weeks you will have multiple opportunities to read and respond to various articles; revise and expand, using the thesis statement to develop a longer, more sophisticated piece of writing; and, ultimately, create a **portfolio** of writing that will challenge and expand your critical thinking abilities as well as introduce you to the conventions and standards of college-level writing. You will consider new expectations of literacy in this new writing scenario, and weigh them against your previous experiences of reading and writing. Reflecting upon your abilities will help you understand yourself as a writer, and motivate you to more challenging composing situations.

Learning Objectives: This class will enable you to be more comfortable expressing shorter arguments and thesis statements. You will be able to work around issues with or without strong personal opinion, and create readable reactions accordingly. You will hone your abilities to interpret short readings, making comparisons within and between these readings, both in classroom discussion and in short essays and response papers. Your writing improvement will be commensurate with your willingness to express your views through your work, and to experience new perspectives.

Textbook and Required Materials: There is one textbook for this class, available at the John Jay Bookstore, called The Mercury Reader, which is specifically designed **by me**, and bears my name on the title page. Do not buy The Riverside Reader or any other text that is required for many other sections of 101. Students are also strongly encouraged to purchase Diana Hacker's A Pocket Style Manual. You will need a large, three-ring binder or two-pocket folder in which to keep all assignments. Please bring paper, pens, and the assigned reading to every class.

Course Policies: You are a member of a classroom community and as such have an obligation to maintain certain community standards. *Cell-phone usage will not be tolerated.* Please turn off your devices prior to entering the classroom; repeated violations will count against your grade, and documented disruptions will lead to your *removal* from the class. In this classroom, we will encounter new and strange ideas and we will practice new and demanding skills. In order for us to be successful as a community, we need to be respectful of each other's learning processes. It is imperative that we treat each other with **courtesy**. Talking over each other or the teacher, sleeping, not having the necessary materials, and not having done the assignment are all manifestations of disrespect for the class and will hurt your grade. Grades for participation are not

only based on how much you talk in class but also on how **respectful** you are of each other, of the teacher, and of your own work. Conscientious and prepared attentiveness is the best road to informed, interesting, heated debate and a good grade.

This course syllabus is part of a **Course Handout Packet** that contains valuable information regarding assignments and generating timely, effective papers. **Do not lose this Course Handout Packet. I will *not* provide another copy to you.**

Course Attendance: I expect you to attend class regularly—I will take roll every class session; **you will be considered absent if you come to class more than 15 minutes late.** Please show up on time and remain until class is over. It is your responsibility to miss no more than **four** class sessions or accept a **failing** grade. You are responsible for all the work we do in class and out of class even if you are not in attendance. In this composition course, we discuss techniques and styles of writing that you will master in college. It is imperative that you attend class without fail and that you arrive with the reading and writing assignments prepared, in hand; to do well in this course you must be present—physically, mentally, and intellectually. Your classmates and I need your contribution to classroom discussions if this is to be an enriching experience.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism and cheating are violations of CUNY's policy on academic integrity (http://www1.cuny.edu/portal_ur/content/2004/policies/image/policy.pdf). By registering in this course, you are promising to abide by all the requirements stated in this policy. Students in breach of this policy are liable to severe penalty, including disciplinary action. See also pp. 44-5 of the JJC Undergraduate Bulletin for further explanation. Repeated offenses may lead to expulsion.

If you commit plagiarism in this class, you will fail. Particularly in this class, which emphasizes bringing your personal perspectives to your writing, plagiarism is counterproductive.

The Writing Center is a free service offered to all students at John Jay. It is located in 2450 North Hall. The Center provides individual tutoring and frequent workshops, flyers for which are available in the English department. To make an appointment, call 212-237-8569 or visit at <http://web.jjay.cuny.edu/~writing/homepage.htm>. After the first assignment, some students in need of grammar and mechanics help may be referred to the writing center. However, I strongly encourage everyone to take advantage of this free service. It can only help you.

Course Requirements: This is a portfolio-based class, which means that at the end of the semester you will be required to turn in a portfolio of all prior assignments. This final portfolio will be worth 25% of your final grade. You are required to keep all assignments in a binder or folder to be turned in at the end of the semester. **I will not accept late work. Please make note of assignment due dates—I will not accept late work, or emailed work, without exception.** All assignments are expected to be **typed** and **double-spaced**, and following APA Style. Students are required to attend one individual conference with the instructor to review mid-term progress; missing this conference will constitute **two absences**.

Grades: Here is the breakdown of grade percentages:

- 1) Inquiry-based paper is worth 25% of your grade. This grade includes all elements of the paper-writing process (proposal, outline, drafts) as shown in the assignment handout.
- 2) Final portfolio is 25% of the final grade. This portfolio should contain all work completed during the semester, and your grade will reflect the quality of your writing, as well as any improvement over the course of the semester. It will also reflect that all assignments are completed, with particular emphasis on assignments that were not previously graded.

- 3) Participation and quizzes are worth 15% of the final grade. Quizzes may be announced or unannounced, and will be particularly utilized if participation is waning.
- 4) Five graded response papers are worth 5% of your grade each (25% total).
- 5) One graded compare & contrast paper is worth 5% of your grade.
- 6) Final exam is worth 5% of your final grade.

Schedule of Readings and Assignments:

Note: Readings and assignments are subject to change. All readings are from The Mercury Reader, available at the John Jay bookstore. You are expected to have all writing assignments at the beginning of class, before discussion begins. I will collect six writing assignments for grading throughout the semester; naturally, you are expected to complete all writing at the assigned date for potential collection and potential use during in-class activities. **I will not accept late work, without exception.**

Aug 31: Introductions and explanation of course description; writing a letter about your experiences from topics assigned in class

For next class: Read “Beauty” and “The Female Body” Write 350-500 word response paper.

What is a Response Paper?

A response paper gives **you** the chance to take a position on the assigned reading, or another topic given by the professor in advance, and explain your argument. The word limit encourages you to be precise in stating your position, and backing it up.

Sept 5: Discuss “Beauty” and “The Female Body”

For next class: Read “Blame it on Feminism” Write 350-500 word response paper.

Sept 7: Discuss “Blame it on Feminism”

For next class: Read “The Rites of Sisterhood” Write 350-500 word response paper.

Sept 12: Discuss “The Rites of Sisterhood”

For next class: Read “Being a Man” and “What I’ve Learned From Men” Write 350-500 word response paper.

Sept 14: Discuss “Being a Man” and “What I’ve Learned From Men”

For next class: Draft paper proposal

Sept 19: Peer Review of Proposals / Introduction of Annotated Bibliography

For next class: Revise proposals / prepare for library visit and research

Sept 21: Library Visit – Research for Annotated Bibliography

For next class: Read “The Gender Blur” Write 350-500 word response paper.

Sept 26: Discuss “The Gender Blur”

For next class: Read “Men and Women Talking on the Job” Write 350-500 word response paper.

Sept 28: Discuss “Men and Women Talking on the Job”

For next class: Bring first draft of inquiry-based essay

Oct 3: No class

Oct 5: Peer review of first draft

For next class: Prepare a working outline of your paper; Read “Where Do Mermaids Stand?”

Oct 10: Discuss “Where Do Mermaids Stand?” **Turn in first draft and outline**

For next class: Read “Sexism and the Art of Feminist Hip-Hop Maintenance”

Oct 12: Discuss “Sexism and the Art of Feminist Hip-Hop Maintenance”
For next class: Compose assigned compare-and-contrast essay (750-1000 words)

Oct 17: Peer Review of essay / Writing exercises
For next class: Read “Women Like Us” and “Freedom Denied” Write 350-500 word response paper.

Oct 19: Discuss “Women Like Us” and “Freedom Denied”
For next class: Read “Double Lives on the Down Low” Write 350-500 word response paper.

Oct 24: Discuss “Double Lives on the Down Low”
For next class: Read “Gay” and “Magic and AIDS...” Write 350-500 word response paper.

Oct 26: Discuss “Gay” and “Magic and AIDS...”
Prepare portfolios for mid-term conferences
For next class: Bring second draft of inquiry-based paper

Oct 31: Class canceled for **mandatory** mid-term review conference

Nov 2: Class canceled for **mandatory** mid-term review conference

Nov 7: Peer Review: Second Draft of inquiry-based paper
For next class: Read “No Room at the Church” and “Twenty-One Questions” Write 350-500 word response paper.

Nov 8: Last day to resign without academic penalty for the Fall 2006 semester

Nov 9: Discuss “No Room at the Church” and “Twenty-One Questions”
For next class: Read “Pornography” and “Virtual Sex...” Write 350-500 word response paper.

Nov 14: Discuss “Pornography” and “Virtual Sex...”
For next class: Read “Gals and Dolls...” and “The Smurfette Principle” Write 350-500 word response paper.

Nov 16: Discuss “Gals and Dolls...” and “The Smurfette Principle”
For next class: Read “The Cookie Crumbles...” and “Why I Hate Family Values...” Write 350-500 word response paper.

Nov 21: Discuss “The Cookie Crumbles...” and “Why I Hate Family Values...”
For next class: Bring Final Draft of Paper for Workshop

Thanksgiving Break

Nov 28: Peer Editing and Course Evaluations
For next class: Bring revised copy of final draft for submission

Nov 30: Final Draft of Paper is Due
For next class: Read “Rape: A Bigger Danger Than Feminists Know” Write 350-500 word response paper.

Dec 5: Discuss “Rape: A Bigger Danger Than Feminists Know”

For next class: Read “Are You Politically Incorrect?” Write 350-500 word response paper.

Dec 7: Discuss “Are You Politically Incorrect?”

Dec 12: Final Summary of Course

Take-Home Final Exam: Will be assigned during the final weeks of the course, and due no later than the December 19 at 6:15pm.

John Jay College of Criminal Justice
 City University of New York
 445 West 59th Street
 New York, NY 10019

Fall 2006

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| Instructor: Rob Faunce | rfaunce@jjay.cuny.edu |
| Literature 230: Classical Literature | professorfaunce@yahoo.com |
| Section 14: Period 5 Tu/Th 1:55-3:10 | Room: 2510N |
| Office: 1258 N | Office Hours: Tu/Th 9:30-10:15 |
| Prerequisite: English 102 | Tu/Th 1:00-1:55 |

Course Description: This course offers a survey of major works of premodern world literature—“classic” works of Greece and other regions that depict people and situations quite distant from our own 21st century lives. We will seek to extract information about the cultures in which these texts were written, as well as explore the tropes that emerge: divinity and the individual, heroism, the construction of identity and gender, and power. We will make comparisons both within and across these texts/cultures, including a 21st Century response to a Greek myth.

Learning Objectives: Through an examination of ancient literature, students will sharpen their critical reading skills and articulate responses to particular literary texts, both through discussion and through assigned papers. At the end of this course you should have a groundwork laid of premodern literary antecedents to modern society. From these experiences you will consider new expectations of literacy and weigh them against your previous experiences of reading and writing. Reflecting upon these abilities will help you understand yourself as a writer.

Textbook and Required Materials: These materials are on order at the John Jay bookstore. Please be sure to select the exact text by ISBN.

The Norton Anthology of Western Literature: Volume 1: Eighth Edition ISBN: 0-393-92572-2

The Penelopiad (Canongate) ISBN: 0676974252

The Burial at Thebes (FSG) ISBN: 0374530076

The Oresteia (FSG) ISBN: 0374527059

Cuckoos (Oberon) ISBN: 1840021519

Mourning Becomes Electra (Vintage) ISBN: 0679763961

Course Policies: You are a member of a classroom community and as such have an obligation to maintain certain community standards. *Cell-phone usage will not be tolerated.* Please turn off your devices prior to entering the classroom; repeated violations will count against your grade, and documented disruptions will lead to your *removal* from the class. In this classroom, we will encounter new and strange ideas and we will practice new and demanding skills. In order for us to be successful as a community, we need to be respectful of each other’s learning processes. It is imperative that we treat each other with **courtesy**. Talking over each other or the teacher, sleeping, not having the necessary materials, and not having done the assignment are all manifestations of disrespect for the class and will hurt your grade. Repeated disruptions will lead to your *removal* from the class. Grades for participation are not only based on how much you talk in class but also on how **respectful** you are of each other, of the teacher, and of your own work. Conscientious and prepared attentiveness is the best road to informed, interesting, heated debate and a good grade.

This course syllabus is part of a **Course Handout Packet** that contains valuable information regarding assignments and generating timely, effective papers.

Do not lose this Course Handout Packet. I will *not* provide another copy to you.

Course Attendance: I expect you to attend class regularly—I will take roll every class session; **you will be marked absent if you come to class more than 15 minutes late.** Please show up on time and remain until class is over; please do not ask for permission to leave my class early. It is your responsibility to be marked absent at no more than **four** class sessions or accept a **failing** grade. You are responsible for all the work we do in class and out of class even if you are not in attendance.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism and cheating are violations of CUNY's policy on academic integrity (http://www1.cuny.edu/portal_ur/content/2004/policies/image/policy.pdf). By registering in this course, you are promising to abide by all the requirements stated in this policy. Students in breach of this policy are liable to severe penalty, including disciplinary action. See also pp. 44-5 of the JJC Undergraduate Bulletin for further explanation. Repeated offenses may lead to expulsion.

If you commit plagiarism in this class, you will fail the class. Particularly in this class, which emphasizes bringing your personal perspectives to your writing, plagiarism is counterproductive.

The Writing Center is a free service offered to all students at John Jay. It is located in 2450 North Hall. The Center provides individual tutoring and frequent workshops, flyers for which are available in the English department. To make an appointment, call 212-237-8569 or visit at <http://web.jjay.cuny.edu/~writing/homepage.htm>. After the first assignment, some students in need of grammar and mechanics help may be referred to the writing center. However, I strongly encourage everyone to take advantage of this free service. It can only help you.

Course Requirements: This is a writing-enhanced class, which means that there will be regular writing assignments throughout the course. **I will not accept late work. Please make note of assignment due dates—I will not accept late work, or emailed work, without exception.** All assignments are expected to be **typed** and **double-spaced**, and following APA Style. Students are required to attend one individual conference with the instructor to review mid-term progress; missing this conference will constitute **two absences**.

Grades: Here is the breakdown of grade percentages:

- Five Response Papers of 500 to 750 words. Each response paper must be turned in on the assigned date (see Schedule of Readings and Assignments). These papers are each worth 10% of your grade, totaling 50%. Each paper should give a reflection on the reading that conveys your position with precision. You must turn in **five** of **nine** assigned response papers. The paper topics are in your Course Handout Packet.
 - Participation and quizzes are worth 20% of the final grade. Quizzes may be announced or unannounced, and will be particularly utilized if participation is waning. Active, thoughtful participation and discussion is expected.
 - Final Paper is worth 20% of the final grade.
 - There is one individual presentation on poetry worth 5% of your grade.
 - Group presentation(s) are worth 5% of your grade.
- ❖ There is no extra credit in this course. Please do not ask for it.
 - ❖ I do not accept resubmitted work. Please revise your work before you turn it in for grading.

Schedule of Readings and Assignments:

Note: Readings and assignments are subject to change. Please bring appropriate texts to each class. Informed participation depends on your regular access to that day's text.

- Aug 31: Introductions and *The Descent of Inanna* (handout)
- Sept 5: *Gilgamesh* pp. 15-33 **Paper #1 due (mandatory paper)**
- Sept 7: Poems by Sappho: Student Presentations
- Sept 12: Poems by Catullus: Student Presentations
- Sept 14: *The Penelopiad* pp. 1-98
- Sept 19: *The Odyssey* pp. 206-300
- Sept 21: *The Odyssey* pp. 301-402
- Sept 26: *The Odyssey* pp. 403-495
- Sept 28: *The Penelopiad* pp. 99-198 **Paper #2 due**
- Oct 3: No class
- Oct 5: *The Iliad* pp. 107-157
- Oct 10: *The Iliad* pp. 158-205 **Paper #3 due**
- Oct 12: *Oedipus Rex* pp. 612-652
- Oct 17: *Cuckoos* **Paper #4 is due**
- Oct 19: *Antigone* pp. 653-687
- Oct 24: *Burial at Thebes* **Paper #5 is due**
- Oct 26: *Antigone* Group Presentation
- Oct 31: Class canceled for **mandatory** mid-term review conference (**two absences** if you miss it)
- Nov 2: Class canceled for **mandatory** mid-term review conference (**two absences** if you miss it)
- Nov 7: *Antigone* Group Presentation
- Nov 8: Last day to resign without academic penalty for the Fall 2006 semester**
- Nov 9: *Medea* pp. 690-720 **Paper #6 is due**
- Nov 14: *Agamemnon* pp. 3-88 from *The Oresteia* **Paper #7 is due**
- Nov 16: *Homecoming* from *Mourning Becomes Electra*

Nov 21: *Cheophori* pp. 89-148 from *The Oresteia*

Thanksgiving Break

Nov 28: *The Hunted* from *Mourning Becomes Electra*

Nov 30: *The Eumenides* pp. 149-end from *The Oresteia* **Paper #8 is due**

Dec 5: *The Haunted* from *Mourning Becomes Electra*

Dec 7: *The Aeneid* pp. 930-973 **Paper #9 is due**

Dec 12: *The Aeneid* pp. 974-1022

Final Paper is due by Final Exam, scheduled for December 21, 8:00pm. Late papers will not be accepted. Be vigilant about meeting this deadline.

John Jay College of Criminal Justice
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445 West 59th Street
New York, NY 10019

Fall 2006

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| Instructor: Rob Faunce | rfaunce@jjay.cuny.edu |
| Literature 231: Medieval and Early Modern Literature | professorfaunce@yahoo.com |
| Section 10 Period 5 Tu/Th 8:15-9:30 | Room: 2513N |
| Office: 1258 N | Office Hours: Tu/Th 9:30-10:15 |
| Prerequisite: English 102 | Tu/Th 1:00-1:55 |

Course Description: This course offers a study of medieval and early modern literature covering roughly the period from 600 to 1700. We will perform close readings and analyses of a variety of genres, including epics, drama, and poetry, with an eye to literary form and style as well as to content. Thematically, the texts we will read reflect canonical concerns: they are “important,” but what is it that makes them important? How we read them and what new themes emerge from their collection in this course will depend on the specific concerns addressed throughout discussion and writing during the course.

Learning Objectives: Through an examination of medieval and early modern literature, students will sharpen their critical reading skills and articulate responses to particular literary texts, both through discussion and through assigned papers. At the end of this course you should have a groundwork laid of important texts of the medieval and early modern period that reflects not only understanding of the some of the unique cultures of those moments but also as literary antecedents to modern society. From these experiences you will consider new expectations of literacy and weigh them against your previous experiences of reading and writing. Reflecting upon these abilities will help you understand yourself as a writer.

Textbook and Required Materials: These materials are on order at the John Jay bookstore. Please be sure to select the exact text by ISBN.

The Norton Anthology of Western Literature: Volume 1: Eighth Edition ISBN: 0-393-92572-2

Twelfth Night, William Shakespeare ISBN: 0-743-48277-8

Edward II, Christopher Marlowe ISBN: 1-85459-410-9

Course Policies: You are a member of a classroom community and as such have an obligation to maintain certain community standards. *Cell-phone usage will not be tolerated.* Please turn off your devices prior to entering the classroom; repeated violations will count against your grade, and documented disruptions will lead to your *removal* from the class. In this classroom, we will encounter new and strange ideas and we will practice new and demanding skills. In order for us to be successful as a community, we need to be respectful of each other’s learning processes. It is imperative that we treat each other with **courtesy**. Talking over each other or the teacher, sleeping, not having the necessary materials, and not having done the assignment are all manifestations of disrespect for the class and will hurt your grade. Repeated disruptions will lead to your *removal* from the class. Grades for participation are not only based on how much you talk in class but also on how **respectful** you are of each other, of the teacher, and of your own work. Conscientious and prepared attentiveness is the best road to informed, interesting, heated debate and a good grade.

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Course Attendance: I expect you to attend class regularly—I will take roll every class session; **you will be marked absent if you come to class more than 15 minutes late.** Please show up on time and remain until class is over; please do not ask for permission to leave my class early. It is your responsibility to be marked absent at no more than **four** class sessions or accept a **failing** grade. You are responsible for all the work we do in class and out of class even if you are not in attendance.

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The Writing Center is a free service offered to all students at John Jay. It is located in 2450 North Hall. The Center provides individual tutoring and frequent workshops, flyers for which are available in the English department. To make an appointment, call 212-237-8569 or visit at <http://web.jjay.cuny.edu/~writing/homepage.htm>. After the first assignment, some students in need of grammar and mechanics help may be referred to the writing center. However, I strongly encourage everyone to take advantage of this free service. It can only help you.

Course Requirements: **I will not accept late work. Please make note of assignment due dates—I will not accept late work, or emailed work, without exception.** All assignments are expected to be **typed** and **double-spaced**, and following APA Style. Students are required to attend one individual conference with the instructor to review mid-term progress; missing this conference will constitute **two absences**.

Grades: Here is the breakdown of grade percentages:

- One paper of 3-5 pages worth 15% of the final grade.
 - One paper of 6-8 pages worth 30% of the final grade.
 - Participation and quizzes are worth 20% of the final grade. Quizzes may be announced or unannounced, and will be particularly utilized if participation is waning. Active, thoughtful participation and discussion is expected.
 - Final Exam is worth 25% of the final grade.
 - There is one individual presentation on poetry worth 10% of your grade.
- ❖ There is no extra credit in this course. Please do not ask for it.
 - ❖ I do not accept resubmitted work. Please revise your work before you turn it in for grading.

Schedule of Readings and Assignments:

Note: Readings and assignments are subject to change. Please bring appropriate texts to each class. Informed participation depends on your regular access to that day's text.

Aug 31: Introductions

Sept 5: *Beowulf* pp. 1174-1197

Sept 7: *Beowulf* pp. 1197-1218

Sept 12: *Beowulf* pp. 1219-1247

Sept 14: *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* pp. 1576-1598

Sept 19: *The Decameron* pp. 1598-1641

Sept 21: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* pp. 1642-1669

Sept 26: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* pp. 1669-1695

Sept 28: *Marie de France* pp. 1316-1325 and *Medieval Women* pp. 1843-1882

Oct 3: No class

Oct 5: *The Canterbury Tales* pp. 1696-1732

Oct 10: *The Canterbury Tales* pp. 1732-1768

Oct 12: *A Thousand and One Nights* pp. 1769-1793

Oct 17: *A Thousand and One Nights* pp. 1793-1820

Oct 19: *Mandeville's Travels*

Oct 24: *Petrarch*: **Student Poetry Presentations**

Oct 26: *Lyric Poetry*: **Student Poetry Presentations**

Oct 31: Class canceled for **mandatory** mid-term review conference (**two absences** if you miss it)

Nov 2: Class canceled for **mandatory** mid-term review conference (**two absences** if you miss it)

Nov 7: *Carpe Diem Lyric Poetry*: **Student Poetry Presentations**

Nov 8: Last day to resign without academic penalty for the Fall 2006 semester

Nov 9: *Paradise Lost* pp. 2550-2584

Nov 14: *Paradise Lost* pp. 2584-2620

Nov 16: *Paradise Lost* pp. 2620-2632

Nov 21: *Edward II* (film screening)

Thanksgiving Break

Nov 28: *Edward II* (film screening)

Nov 30: *Edward II* Acts 1 and 2

Dec 5: *Edward II* Acts 3, 4, and 5

Dec 7: *Twelfth Night* Acts 1 and 2

Dec 12: *Twelfth Night* Acts 3, 4, and 5

Final Exam scheduled for December 19, 8:00am.

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