

THE BOREDOMS, FAILURES OF ATTENTION
AND A PEDAGOGY OF OPENING

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I take as my central premise that the ways we learn to pay attention and the ways we perceive attention are not solely neurological, but also cultural, and as such, perceived failures of attention like distraction and boredom are not failures at all, but rather mismatches of attention structure that comment on the power relationships out of which they arise. I investigate the ways cultures, institutions and language itself affect the circulation and demands of attention and the ability to fulfill those demands. I speak of boredom not as one thing, but of “the boredom” as a family of feelings separate from apathy—not deficits, but distributions of attention that might not neatly fit the situation at hand. This dissertation focuses on oppressive boredom—those that arise from trauma or feeling trapped in an educational environment, for example, or even feeling trapped in a cycle with technology—and how these boredom affect literacy learning.

I compare studies on boredom and attention in cognitive neuroscience and literacy research in order to better understand the cultural constructs of attention, both in the research itself and in the rhetoric used to deliver that research. As a teacher, I examine the assignments and structures that give rise to essays that sometimes appear bored or boring. As a rhetorician, I close read these same student essays, looking at what the student has done instead of what

they've failed to do. Building off of Sianne Ngai's theory of "stuplimity," I read student writing to look for the signal in noise and the order in disorder. If avant-garde writers can confound readers with repetitions and obfuscations and be called geniuses commenting on the drudgery of the capitalist machine, then perhaps some of the same mechanisms are inadvertently at play in student work. I show how students can adapt the resources of boredom to comment on and even challenge the machines (particular assignments, academia, Standard Written English, "addiction" to technology, trauma and so on) in which they feel trapped.

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PREFACE

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I want to thank my sister for being my strongest support my whole life, and also for teaching me to talk when I was ten months old—that has come in quite handy. I want to thank Sarah Najjar both for being an amazing friend and for setting straight some of my ridiculous theories about neuroscience. I'd like to thank my colleagues, especially Katie Bird, who talked to me about being a human being and not just a scholar, to Ty'rica Terry who has been a rock, and to Jen Saltmarsh, who I met over 15 years ago in a coffee shop in California reading a composition article. We've been pretty side by side ever since. A lot of love also goes out to Kerry Banazek who has been one of the single most reliable friends I've ever known.

I also have to thank Mary Soliday and Mariolina Salvatori, who have counseled me from afar-- and Keith Davis of athletic advising, without whom I wouldn't have made it through one month of

Workshop in Composition. And of course, and especially, my brilliant and sometimes bored students, especially the gentlemen of Hall WC/SC. This is all for you.

1.0 NEVER NOT PAYING ATTENTION: THE BOREDOMS

What would modern boredom be without terror? One of the most boring documents of all times is the thick volume of Hitler's "Table Talk." He too (like Stalin) had people watching movies, eating pastries, and drinking coffee with Schlag while he bored them, while he discoursed, theorized, expounded. Everyone was perishing of staleness and fear, afraid to go to the toilet. This combination of power and boredom has never been properly examined. Boredom is an instrument of social control. Power is the power to impose boredom, to command stasis, to combine stasis with anguish.

Saul Bellow, *Humboldt's Gift*

It's such a/ Bore/ Being always/ Poor

Langston Hughes "Ennui"

Pay attention. Keep your eyes on the page. Whatever you do, don't check your phone. Don't let the ticking of the clock distract you, the strange bird outside the window, your heartbreak, your

hunger. Pay attention. Don't think about your bills, the argument you had last night, the people who love you or the people you wish would love you more. Don't think about the pain in your back or wonder if your eyesight is getting worse (Do you read too much? Should you get your vision checked? Don't think about that now.) Don't let sleepiness or whatever else your body would have you focus on overtake you. Don't skip words, don't let your eyes glaze over and while you think about your outside worries—think about the words in front of you. The only thing that matters is this document—so don't let your mind wander. Pay attention, be a good scholar, a good reader, sit still and focus on the text.

“Pay attention” is a useless command because attention isn't obedient. The more we try to force it one way, the more it jumps ship and swims in the opposite direction. And there are *so many things* to pay attention to. It's a ridiculous command because we are never *not* paying attention. It's just that sometimes we're paying attention to the “wrong” thing: the phone, the hunger, the social dynamics of the class—instead of the essay due tomorrow, the teacher in the front of the room, the novel in our hands. “Pay attention” is a nonsensical command because it's impossible to tell when someone else is paying attention. The markers of paying attention: eyes on the page, upright sitting posture, don't necessarily mean we're concentrating on what we're supposed to be concentrating on at all, just that we know how to perform concentration well. Still, I tell my students to pay attention all the time, futile as it is. Without realizing what I'm about to say, it just comes out of my mouth. For a second, the students snap to. And then they're distracted again by their technology and their social lives and their bodies—until the work of the

class has enough to do with their technology and their social lives and their bodies that I can sometimes holler my entreaty less.

In his 1994 address, “The Economics of Attention,”¹ rhetorician Richard Lanham claimed: “if one is looking for a glimpse of what literacy will look like in the future, the fighter cockpit is a good place to look” (Lanham n.p.) In other words, he predicted that literacy acts would involve the fending off of numerous distractions and require an increasing amount of attentional skill (the skill necessary for us to engage and keep concentration on one pertinent task) in order for the reader to remain focused on the task at hand. In his address, Lanham suggested that we were facing, “not a population explosion, but a document explosion,” which would lead to a new scarcity, the scarcity of “the human attention needed to make sense of information.” Since that address², the idea of the “Attention Economy” has become quite popular in literacy studies and has also taken hold in the social sciences, advertising, behavioral sciences, business schools, film studies, computer sciences and in economic circles. Advertisers and game developers often refer to attention in terms of “eyeballs.” That is: “how many eyeballs” can we get on our product or game? How can we draw attention? Literacy scholars and other humanists tend to think of the economics of attention more from the perspective of the attentive animal: how much attention does the agent have to give, and how do they decide to give it? In

¹ In 2006, Lanham published a book by the same name.

² Lanham was not the first to talk about the economics of attention, though he is largely attributed with bringing this concept into currency in discussions of literacy. In 1971, economist Herbert A. Simon pointed out that an influx of information created a “poverty of attention” (Simon 40)

both of these instances, attention economics is seen as relating to the individual. As fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture at the University of Virginia Matthew Crawford puts it, “Attention is a resource—a person only has so much of it” (11).

I don’t think we can look at how an individual inside a fighter cockpit behaves without looking at the factors that placed them in a fighter jet in the first place. In other words, just as the study of economics is much more than the study of how one individual distributes the pennies in their piggy bank, so should the study of the economics of attention be the study of much more than how each individual distributes their kernels of attention among the many possible attractors of that attention. And yet, much, if not most, of the discussion of attentional economics is just that: how does an individual slog through the endless information they’re faced with? How does one pick out a voice from the cacophony on the internet? My point here is that attention is not a purely physiological or personal impulse, but also a social one; we *learn* to pay attention (or to act like we’re paying attention;) we *learn* what ways of paying attention are socially acceptable in certain situations and not others; we *learn* who and what to pay attention to and so on. This learning is social, not just a personal neurological resource.

In this dissertation, I investigate the social and cultural aspects of attention, focusing on the ways in which these factors affect individuals struggling with literacy learning. If attention is currency, who controls it, who gets it, and why? When is this currency “forged” or mimicked? And what of “alternative currencies”—that is, forms of attention that are equally valid but not valued in academia or other literacy circles? In the words of Daniel Gross, from his book on the

social history of emotion: “it makes a difference in the end not only what sort of passions are distributed to whom, but also how they are hoarded and monopolized and how their systematic denial helps produce political subjects of a certain kind” (49).

Like Gross, I’m interested in distributions of power. In the following pages, I explore the relationship between power and attention (often, as Bellow suggests, through the lens of boredom) to see how power and attention are distributed and how they might be distributed differently in the academic teaching of writing. Through looking at what Rodney Jones calls “attention structures,” which are the “cultural tools distributed across individuals, mediational means and interactional conventions that determine how cognitive and social attention are distributed in different kinds of social practices,”(1) I am able to examine uses of attention sometimes thought of as “non-normative” like boredom and noise. I look at these structures as Mina Shaughnessy looked at student writing commonly thought of as error-ridden, not as evidence of failure, but as evidence of work being done (or of attention being paid.) Unlike Shaughnessy, however, my project is not to “fix” these alternative uses of attention, but instead to change the ways we read them, taking the social structures that give rise to those attention structures into account. Please understand: I value Shaughnessy’s project a great deal. I consider my work part of a legacy of which she is one of the most important progenitors. However, I am willing to stay perhaps longer with student writing that is labeled “non-normative,” not searching for ways to fit it into normative forms, but searching for ways to *read* that writing differently, so that it might be legible within an expanded sense of what “normative” could be. I

argue that we should allow for the possibility that there may be strengths in what we have heretofore imagined to be attentional weaknesses—and, most importantly, that we not insist that students perform normativity as a condition of engaging in writing.

This dissertation asks: what are students and other writers paying attention to when they're supposedly “not paying attention?” What are students *doing* with distraction, with noise, with boredom? These aren't simple questions to answer, in part because boredom, distraction and noise are hard to pay clear attention to. Noise obscures its message; distraction hops from one track to another without warning; and boredom, well, as we'll soon discuss, it's impossible to put a finger on exactly what boredom *is*. There can be no easy general answer to what boredom or noise or distraction *want*. But they are unavoidable ingredients of the learning and literacy processes. We can either dismiss them as some sort of wasteful byproducts that detract from the clean production of reading and writing, or we can assume they are doing something. We can assume that even *writing* that looks at first blush, bored, boring or noisy, is doing some kind of work. And what might that work be? In the words of Sianne Ngai, it might : “[force] the reader to go on in spite of [our] equal enticement to give up... pushing us to reformulate new tactics for reading” (272).

This does not mean that I am asking my own readers to disavow legibility in student writing, only that I hope we will not dismiss writing as “illegible” too easily. Student writers still need to communicate with an audience under this model, and as instructors of writing, it's our responsibility to help them name and reach those audiences. However, I would argue that we

allow students a right to their own audience. That is, I would argue for a broader range than that which is proscribed by generic standardized essays. I hope this dissertation is a praxis of opening, a guide for its readers to develop new tactics for reading unfamiliar or previously unnoticed attention-situations, for broadening definitions of, as I discuss in my final chapter, the implicit “audience invoked” in academic writing, and for teaching writing without requiring students to perform normativity.

1.1 WHY “THE BOREDOMS?”

A metaphor more accurate for the environment in which we struggle with contemporary literacy than Lanham’s fighter jet might be the spaceship from Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. It follows two astronauts on the 1968 imaginary of a voyage to Jupiter (three other astronauts are also on the ship, but are in suspended animation.) They are accompanied by a sentient computer, the HAL (*H*euristically Programmed *A*lgorithmic Computer) 9000, known by the astronauts simply as “Hal.” Unlike the thrilling bombardment of distractions of life in Lanham’s fighter jet, life on the spaceship is pretty much a waiting game. The astronauts run laps in the hollow spaces of the ship, punching at the air while ominous music plays in the background; they wait for news from home on the tablets they carry with them, shockingly similar to iPads or Kindles, and they try to have conversations with Hal, who sometimes does and sometimes does not answer. They keep watch for the occasional asteroid hurtling toward the ship. Though these

are successfully avoided by Hal, they need to keep watch just in case he fails.

Mostly what the men do is a whole lot of nothing. They wait. And wait. And wait. And while they're waiting, they try to connect—with each other, with people from home, with Hal. All of this to say that while Lanham was on to something by comparing the things that distract us from literacy to a technological battle, I think he was missing some major elements that are commonly present in the contemporary literacy landscape, namely: 1. The longing for connection 2. The incessant waiting for that connection and 3. The boredom that can come with that waiting.

Though everyone has been bored, there's no single determinate meaning for the word "boredom." There's no unequivocal definition of the word in psychology, neuroscience, philosophy, education, or sociology. As we see below, even the Oxford English Dictionary argues with itself about the etymology of the word "bore:"

Usually supposed to be [...] the notion of 'persistent annoyance' (compare German *drillen*). But it seems impossible in this way to account for [...] the other senses, and of the verb itself [...] The connection must be much more indirect; possibly there is an allusion to some now forgotten anecdote. The phrase 'French bore' naturally suggests that the word is of French origin; *bourre* padding, hence (in 18th cent.) triviality, *bourrer* to stuff, to satiate, might be thought of; but without assuming some intermediate link these words do not quite yield the required sense. ("bore, n.2." *OED Online*)

So does “bore” originate from the German *drillen*, which means “to drill holes” or the French *bourrer*, which means “to stuff, to fill?” The lexicographer is flummoxed--the hole-drilling origin seems unable to account for the first sense of the word (“a fit of ennui or the sulks”) (“bore”, n.1.) but the stuffing full origin doesn’t quite fit either. The lexicographer concludes there must be something missing--perhaps some anecdote long forgotten--that will not only solve the mystery of where the word is from, but will also provide some link between two seemingly opposite origins.

It seems to me that boredom is so difficult to define because boredom resides *within* the very tension between the two feelings of hollowing out and stuffing full. In fact, I would argue that “boredom” is an umbrella term which encompasses countless situations of tension between engagement and disengagement³ ranging from wanting to play but not feeling an affinity for any particular toy to trying to focus on a dry, verbose article, to watching a screen waiting for an asteroid (or enemy airplane) that never hits. A bored person, while clearly not engaged, either doesn’t want to or is unable to fully disengage from the situation at hand. “Clearly,” writes psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, “we should speak not of boredom but of the *boredoms*, because the notion itself includes a multiplicity of moods and feelings” (78 italics mine).

When I tell people I study boredom and its relationship to literacy, they sometimes

³ A 2013 study by cognitive neuroscientists Merrifield and Danckert suggests that boredom results in a physiological tension as well. Their results indicate that boredom causes both low skin conductance levels (which tend to raise when the subject is experiencing anxiety or physiological arousal) and high heart rate—that is, boredom results in a *simultaneous* decrease and increase in arousal. (Merrifield and Danckert 481).

respond by telling me that boredom is a luxury problem; I assume they mean that the bored individual has time on their hands, has the luxury of deciding between the countless activities available to them. And while I don't deny that this may sometimes be so, I strongly believe the boredom of too much time and too many possibilities is not the only boredom there is. Not knowing what to watch on television is boring, but so is being trapped in a prison cell. My point here is that some boredoms arise from *impossibility* (perceived or actual), or at least obstruction—and these imbalances of power are both more dire and more informative to those struggling to engage with literacy, especially in academic settings, than the ennui of too many choices, too many resources, and too much time. According to neuroscientists, the most boring of all tasks is something called a “vigilance task” in which the agent must wait endlessly for something which may or may not happen (the quintessential example of this is that of an air traffic controller, who must wait for hours, as Kubrik's astronauts do, to see if anything out of place happens to appear on his screen) (Mackworth 1375). It is too reductive to argue that this boredom, the boredom of a soldier waiting to fight, and the boredom of a child with too many toys are the same thing.

It is useful, for this discussion, to think of the boredoms in terms of direction: that is, boredom is not only the stagnation of being unable to decide which way to go in a sea of possible beginnings, but also the stasis arising from the tension of conflicting or thwarted beginnings: doors slammed shut just as we've begun to open them, currents drawing us toward places we don't want to go while we swim in the opposite direction, being commanded to look forward

when a million bees bumble in our peripheral vision, or any countless number of situations in which the actor is pulled in so many opposing directions they are unable to make any headway.

The key here is this: that which bores us still has its hooks in us. If I don't want to read a book, for whatever reason, I just don't read it. That is, not wanting to read a book in and of itself is not boring. But if I am required to read the book for a class, or I am under some other obligation to do so, and if I continue not wanting to read the book *while* I'm reading the book, I am likely to call that experience "boredom." Or if I decide to read the book because I know that it will benefit me in some way, but my struggle with the book's repetition of ideas, or my preoccupation with some trauma or trouble in my personal life, or the constant ping-pong of my phone make it difficult to concentrate on the text, I am also likely to call this experience "boredom." Heidegger describes this as a type of limbo:

We straightaway take 'boring' as meaning *wearisome, tedious*, which is not to say indifferent. For if something is wearisome and tedious, then this entails that it has not left us completely indifferent, but on the contrary: we are present while reading, given over to it, but not taken by it. Wearisome means: it does not rivet us; we are given over to it, yet not taken by it, but merely held in limbo (Heidegger 86).

Discussions of boredom often frame the state as a deficit of attention. But the limbo Heidegger describes reframes "the boredom" as a family of feelings separate from apathy-- not deficits, but distributions of attention that might not neatly fit the situation at hand, not mere obstructions, but sites for potential engagement. This dissertation is a study of attention as a

means of access. As such, I'm interested in how to better serve the students who get left behind by current academic relationships to attention. I want to be clear: I don't believe that people who get called "at-risk" or "basic writers" or "disabled" or any number of other uncomfortable labels are any more easily bored than other students (though some may *perform* boredom and attention differently than those who are labeled "normal" students.) However, because the boredom has within them, by their very nature, tension between attention structures, they serve as good entry points for looking at conflicts of attention and power.

1.2 A DEBT TO DIFFICULTY

In *The Elements (and Pleasures) of Difficulty*, Mariolina Salvatori and Patricia Donahue write: "When you encounter moments in a text that seem strange, unpredictable, surprising or counterintuitive—that is a promising place to begin . . . consider your uncertainty as a signal for work to be done" (7). This is my philosophy regarding classroom moments as well: there is usually something interesting happening when everything seems to be falling apart. When I read this passage, I think back on students I've had: the young woman in the first course I taught who sat directly in my line of vision in every single class, with her arms folded and her eyes rolled toward the ceiling, sighing loudly, who wrote me a letter on the last day thanking me for putting up with her, the student who always sat in the far corner of the room with his baseball cap over his eyes but who participated in every discussion and later turned out to be a combat vet with

PTSD, the countless students I've had who tell me with anxiety that they're the worst reader or worst writer I have ever met— and I think about the work that I needed to do and still need to do to understand how boredom, attention and power function in the classroom.

In truth, I, too, had a problematic relationship with academic literacy. I was the kind of student who, like the first student I mention, sighed loudly and rolled my eyes at my teachers. I eventually dropped out of school after a year and a half. I hated, most of all, writing essays. I'll go into the research on this in more detail in Chapter Four, when I talk about the impact of early childhood trauma on cognition, but my own experiences with trauma made essay writing exceptionally confusing and disorienting for me. And despite the fact that I am now an English professor and PhD candidate, I have never forgotten myself as a profoundly attentionally disorganized writer, though I was one who couldn't stop writing (often in clear and vivid sentences.) I filled journal after journal, but simply couldn't figure out how to make any *sense*. At night, I stayed up too late compulsively writing down what seemed like nothing: observations from the day, other people's poems, whatever I could think of to say, sometimes the same line over and over. Now I am unable to bear reading the one journal I've saved from that time. I'm overcome, oddly, with an instantaneous sleepiness when I open it, a stupor. I guess you might call it a boredom.

I had a hard time putting together cause and effect relationships because up to that point in my life, cause and effect had rarely been related. And thesis statements? They just seemed like

nonsense to me. I felt like I was being asked to be expert at something I hadn't even begun to understand. Theses did not just feel false, they felt profoundly disorganizing.

When I returned to college six years later, I still avoided analytical papers whenever I could, majoring in sculpture and taking courses in creative writing and the hard sciences as my electives (the pre-med students never understood why I was taking chemistry classes for fun but I liked courses that had balanced equations and correct answers, even though I had no interest in the field). A few years later, I returned to get an MFA in Fiction. While working on that MFA, I reluctantly took a few composition courses in the hopes they would help me get a teaching job. To my surprise, I found comp pedagogy, especially that which reframes "deficit," like Salvatori and Donahue's aforementioned book on difficulty, completely refreshing. This book so gracefully flipped the script from failure to investigation by asking students to look closely at (and to write about) what they found difficult instead of tossing those concepts aside that it helped me rethink my own writing.

In some ways, the trajectory of this dissertation is that of a difficulty assignment. I begin with a problem: a noisy class full of distracted students who appear to feel disconnected and powerless and look at that problem from various angles, points of view and distances until I am finally able to look for the beginning of a solution, in this case, a pedagogy that opens toward student agency.

In Chapter Two, "Disrupting the Myth of 'the Good Man': The Uses of Noise," I introduce a class, a group of football players at the university on athletic scholarship and deemed

by the school in need of special help. I note that the students are noisy in the traditional auditory sense and also in the visual and physical senses of the word. Salvatori and Donahue discuss the idea of “coded language” that is, “words and phrases (like ‘boring’) that may have rich and complex meanings for the writer, speaker or group using them, but not for others.” With this in mind, the authors suggest that coded language “be explained, made explicit, unpacked”(124), which I try to do in this chapter. I question what “noise” means, troubling its definition, looking at noise as not only an obfuscation of signal, but perhaps as its own kind of signal. I look, with the help of the students’ own writing, at what some of the possible messages of that “noise” might be.

In Chapter Three, “Where Subject and System Intersect: Student Writing and Ngai’s Theory of ‘Stuplimity,’” I look closely at language that is considered “noisy” through the lens of Sianne Ngai’s theory of “stuplimity,” which she defines as a combination of shock and boredom, “a bringing together of what ‘dulls’ and what ‘irritates’ or agitates; of sharp, sudden excitation and prolonged desensitization, exhaustion or fatigue... a tension that holds opposing affects together” (271). She uses the examples of published authors like Gertrude Stein and Samuel Beckett, who purposefully shock and bore readers by barraging them with repetitive and seemingly nonsensical strings of words in order to illustrate to those readers the workings of the entities that control them. By looking at boredom and noise at the sentence level, I’m able to give stuplime student writing the same respect and curiosity Ngai gives Beckett and Stein while at the

same time exploring the specific power struggles that students placed in remedial classes might face.

In Chapter Four, “How am I Supposed to Watch a Little Piece of Paper?: Attention, Boredom and Literacy,” I look at the factors that might draw a reader or writer away from a text, for example: trauma or technology. I look at what is happening to attention when students struggle to engage with writing, noting the directions their attention might be drawn in the hopes that, instead of necessarily redirecting attention we might rethink the ways we discuss attention, literacy and learning. I attempt to look at supposed failures of attention like the tendency of trauma survivors to focus on minute details instead of entire narratives, as not failures at all, but strengths and footholds from which to begin further literacy learning. From here, I introduce a theory of “mastery” in writing pedagogy, which suggests that students find a place to begin where they can feel adept and calm, and use that foothold to take risks with their writing that may have felt too unnerving a place to begin.

In Chapter Five, “So is the World Larger: A Pedagogy of Radical Rhetorical Agency,” I continue the discussion of mastery by looking closely at student writing and student agency. This chapter focuses on the attentional skills students do have and using those skills as strengths, not as bridges to Standard Written English, but as bridges to whatever form of written communication the students decide they want to achieve, with whomever they decide they want to communicate—as long as they are taking the time to pay attention to the language choices they make. I suggest students experiment with language and writing, that they expand the

notion of audience past that which is imagined by a pedagogy that takes Standardized English for granted, and that they build on their existing sites of mastery. Students, I argue, already have a great deal of expertise with language, upon which they will build more expertise as long as they are headed in a direction they want to go, instead of being pulled in an imposed direction. As much as this chapter, and the dissertation as a whole, is a pedagogical intervention for students, it is also an intervention for instructors and other readers of student writing (and behavior,) asking us to reframe the way we read to find these existing footholds.

One final note: I am indebted to the legacy of Pitt Composition scholars such as Salvatori and Donahue as well as Dave Bartholomae and Richard Miller, for their insistence on reading student writing as important theoretical work. “We do read student texts,” Salvatori and Donahue write, “the same way we read into established literary texts, with similar pleasure and for similar reasons: looking for clues, directions, signs of work begun” (xiii). Because I’m investigating who is and isn’t served by the attention economy and how we can better take non-normative attention structures into account to expand the ways we teach reading and writing, I feel I *must* listen to writers who are labeled “marginalized,” not as ethnographic cases but as theorists.

This isn’t just a moral stance, but also a scholarly one. This is the generation who will create the next dictionary, who will decide what the next “books” (maybe not books at all) will look like. Student writing is just that: writing. And as you’ll see throughout this document, much of that writing is beautiful, painful, difficult, thought-provoking and new. In short, it is worth

reading, even if it takes some work on both our parts, on the part of the writer to reach their audience, and on the part of us, the readers, who may have to learn some new tactics for reading.

2.0 DISRUPTING THE MYTH OF THE “GOOD MAN” : THE USES OF NOISE

The posture of the speaker's body ought to be erect, his feet at a little distance but upon the same line, or the left a very little advanced, and his knees in a straight, but not in a stiff posture. His shoulders ought to have an easy fall; his look should be serious, but neither melancholy, stupid, nor languid.

Quintilian, *Eloquence, or The Art of Speaking in Public in Every Character and Capacity*

One of the first scientific articles published on boredom was a piece in *Nature* in 1885 entitled “The Measure of Fidget,” in which the writer, Francis Galton, measures the regularity of bodies at a scientific lecture, claiming:

When the audience is intent, each person forgets his muscular weariness and skin discomfort and he holds himself rigidly in the best position for seeing and hearing. As this is practically identical for persons who sit side by side, their bodies are parallel and again, they sit at much the same distance apart. But when the audience is bored the several individuals cease to

forget themselves and they begin to pay much attention to the discomforts attendant on sitting too long in the same position. (Galton 174)

Galton goes on to try to measure the unknowing subjects' variance from the original parallel posture, suggesting that the "measure of fidget," the indication of boredom, would be the angle by which they disrupt the tidiness of the row. At this, he admits "for the present [I] have failed. I was, however, perfectly successful in respect to another sign of mutiny against constraint, inasmuch as I found myself able to estimate the frequency of fidget with much precision" (174). In other words, when the speaker was most boring (or when Galton thought he was most boring,) the audience performed the most acts of fidgeting (or Galton *noticed* the most acts of fidgeting,) causing Galton to make the claim that boredom, and boredom alone, causes fidgeting. The article ends with a call for a further study to give "numerical expression to the amount of boredom expressed" (175), that is, to make multiple studies marking the "irregular" movement of people's bodies, noting the angle from parallel as some sort of numerical boredom index⁴. This call was again taken up somewhat tongue-in-cheek most recently in a 2008 study in the journal *Medical Teacher* called "Death by Power Point—The Need for a "Fidget Index," which alludes directly to Galton's study and closes with the suggestion that "perhaps we need to apply a 'Fidget Index' to monitoring Power Point Presentations" (Harden 835). A 2013 study on

⁴ While no one, to my knowledge, has ever created an actual "fidget index," there is an often-used "boredom proneness scale," a 28-question questionnaire, which asks respondents to, among other things, rate their level of boredom with tasks such as watching a slide show or waiting in line. This is a different project from the fidget index, to be sure, but has been used to "prove" that certain races, classes and genders of people are supposedly more boredom-prone than others, which seems to be fairly closely aligned with Galton's ideology.

inattention out of the University of Waterloo⁵, cites Galton’s study eleven times in ten pages as anecdotal evidence that “fidgeting behavior is related to inattention” (Carriere, Seli and Smilek, 20)⁶. So While Galton’s makeshift study is well over a century old, it still holds some clout, as does the sentiment that sitting still and looking at the speaker are the most important markers of paying attention. For example, in a 2009 article entitled “Digital Underlife in the Networked Writing Classroom,” Derek N. Mueller writes, “as special-attentive dynamics shift, so must our thinking change about the visual verifiability of attention... the strict correspondence between attention and the gaze has come unhitched” (245-6). To argue that technology has unhitched a “strict connection” is to argue that the connection was once there. I would like to contend, however, there is no reason to assume that this connection exists. Sure, *sometimes*, people look at speakers they’re paying attention to, but sometimes they look elsewhere—they take notes or even doodle. Autists and other neuroatypical learners often report paying better attention when they’re not looking at the person who is speaking. Blind people, of course, don’t look at speakers when they’re listening. To say that attention and the gaze are strictly linked is taking a great deal for granted about the attention situation, and especially about the listener.

While he did notice a great deal of fidgeting at the talk he attended, we don’t know that boredom was the cause. I will discuss fidgeting long history more later in this chapter, but here I

⁵ Interestingly, the “Danckert Attention Lab,” which studies the neuroscience of boredom, is also housed at Waterloo. They did not conduct the study mentioned above, though Danckert *is* thanked for drawing Carriere et. al’s attention to “The Nature of Fidget.”

⁶ This study concludes that fidgeting is “related to” mind wandering, but does not explain whether it is the *result* of mind wandering or something agents do to counteract the wandering of their minds.

will say only that there are a number of reasons one might fidget and look askance: bodily pain, headache, flickering lights in the periphery, a crush on someone sitting across the room, urinary urgency, hunger, exhaustion, autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or because fidgeting helps the subject focus, to name a few. We may suspect that the fidgeting was caused by boredom, but we cannot know for certain. What we do know, though, is that their fidgeting distracted Galton from the speaker. *Galton*, by his own admission, was bored silly by the interlocutor. It is quite possible he sat, as he had been trained to sit, perfectly straight, while he, bored, counted the uneven and noisy bodies, giving a number to what he perceived to be their boredom and none to his own. It's also possible that he, too, fidgeted wildly, but since no one was recording his movements, we don't know anything about his body at all, although he is the only person in the room we know for certain was bored.

Many things are notable about Francis Galton. He was Charles Darwin's cousin. He is attributed with inventing the questionnaire, standard deviation, fingerprinting, weather forecasting and the term "nature vs. nurture." He also, most sinisterly, is credited with inventing the word "eugenics." He liked taxonomies, especially when those classifications resulted in the groups of which he was a part being deemed superior to other groups. His motto was, "when you can, count" (Holt) but he didn't stop with counting, often ascribing results to his data that did not logically follow; in his book *Hereditary Genius*, for example, he noted that eminent individuals had eminent close relatives, but the more distant the relatives were, the less likely

they were to be eminent, which he concluded proved genius was hereditary, failing completely to take cultural factors into account. (Galton Institute).

Compared to his work in eugenics, the boredom study is relatively benign, but it is notable that his was the one of the first marks on the science of boredom. In it, we see Quintilian's "Good Man Speaking Well," transformed only slightly into the "Good Man Paying Attention Well," in which the "Good Man" himself defines what a "Good Man" is—and lo and behold! The Good Man looks and acts just like Galton—even though Galton himself was just as bored and inattentive (or more so) as any of the disobedient bodies he was recording—he was just ascribing value to his own inattentiveness as he was devaluing the perceived inattentiveness of the strangers in the room. The myth of parallel, still, silent bodies in the classroom or lecture hall as markers of attention arises out of Foucauldian systems of docility and obedience more than mechanical acts of attention divorced from the social⁷. "Noisy" behavior like fidgeting, doodling, listening to music and actually making noise are just as likely to be acts of *paying* attention as they are of distraction. And furthermore, noise is defined by audience, context and culture, not by the sound or gesture or visual stimulus itself.

The performances of boredom and attention are *social*—which is to say that some people learn how to perform paying attention in academic situations, while others learn different responses to academic situations—one of which can be the performance of boredom. The

⁷ I will say more later about the folly of divorcing the neurological from the social as though the brain does not belong to a body which lives in a cultural world.

postures often conflated with paying attention do not necessarily mean the actor is actually paying attention to the speaker (Galton wasn't) any more than Quintilian's posture of the "Good Man Speaking Well" means the speaker is either a good man or speaking well—he just knows how a speaker is supposed to stand because he has been taught to stand that way. The question here is: *who* is labeling what counts as disruption and what counts as signal? And what do they stand to gain by this labeling? In this chapter, I argue that we don't know what disruptions will be seen as "noisy" or useless noises, which will be seen as "white" or productive noises, and which will be seen as signals, but that we cannot know until long after the disruptions have been made. Furthermore, I draw attention to scholarship that argues that noise asks us to do work. I argue in this chapter, and throughout the dissertation, that we should not dismiss noise out of hand as not-signal, but instead look at it with interest; we should ask what a noise seeks to disrupt, and what work that disruption is asking us to do.

As Steven Hammer puts it in his forthcoming chapter, "Writing Dirt, Teaching Noise": "a common definition of noise is some variation on . . . a phenomenon that creates displeasure, or of noise simply as an 'unwanted or undesired sound'" (Hammer). This already brings up questions of audience and power. Displeasure is in the eye of the beholder. Or ear. Or mind. And for there to be a disturbance, there must be a status quo to disturb. According to ethnomusicologist Douglas Kahn in his book *Noise, Water, Meat*, in the avant-garde, noise was linked to sounds of military combat, technology and industrialism, as well as pop culture and "the music and languages of cultures outside reigning cultures of European society [as well as]

the sounds of the domestic sphere gendered female,” (21). In other words, intrusions in the form of violence, technological newness and anything outside of white masculinity were labeled “noise.” Notably, in the avant-garde, these “noises” were put to work as art in the music of John Cage or in the plays of Beckett and the fiction of Stein. Removed from the art category, the rumblings of a tank, for example, might be categorized as a noise or a warning, an indication of productivity or a celebration of civic engagement.

Noise, according to Hammer, is so categorized because it requires *work* on the part of the observer. “Noises,” he says, “may require a listener to attempt to focus despite competing sounds” or to “expend attention energy, [to] do work to focus or ignore” (Hammer). It is this very work that transforms a sound into a noise (and for the avant-garde, into art.) But, as he points out, there is really no difference between signal and noise:

There is no inherent characteristic of sonic phenomena that makes it noise and there is no system free from interruptions, disruptions, corruptions and the corresponding work it requires to resolve them. Yet many still talk of noise as though it is a distinct and separate agent-event that spoils the communication party. We might call this the myth of noiselessness. (Hammer)

What follows in the next section are some observations of my students’ and my own relationships and discomforts with noise and with silence as we try to navigate an especially noisy classroom. I refer to a course I taught to football players who were deemed in need of special help with reading and writing. I taught their pre-transfer level course, and the students

requested I teach their transfer-level course in the second semester. I discuss mostly the second semester class⁸. In particular, this section focuses on our class' relationship with that ubiquitous contemporary distraction: the cellular telephone. I did set out to cure the noisiness of the class, and at that I failed, but I learned that within the noise was a great deal of signal. The students' phones were an important part of the communication of the classroom that helped the functioning of the course as much as they hurt it; the phones were not only a way for the students to escape from and rebel against the class (which they sometimes were) but also a way for them to bring their non-school lives into the class and help them feel comfortable in what was, for them, sometimes very unfamiliar territory.

2.1 THE CELL PHONE QUARANTINE

My students were on their phones. I mean, they were *always* on their phones. More than any other class I'd taught in my over eight years of teaching, they were constantly staring down at their screens—sometimes hiding them in their bags or under their desks, sometimes not even bothering to hide them at all. I'd admonish them to put the phones away, I'd threaten to punish them, I *would* punish them (in this case, even talking to the head coach of the football team, which led to occasional short suspensions) but it didn't help. Almost as though they themselves

⁸ All student input is used with IRB approval.

didn't notice it, their hands would sneak into their bags and they'd be texting (or tweeting or snapping or god knows what) again. To be honest, it was distracting *me*. And while I try not to fall into Galton's boat and project my distraction onto others or make too many claims about what's going on with other people's attention, it seemed pretty clear that their phones *were* distracting them from the work of the class. They would forget assignments, sometimes forget what I'd asked them to do, just seconds after I'd asked. And as I said above, no amount of cajoling, begging, threatening or punishing seemed to work. They were noisy in every sense of the word: fidgety, loud, disrupting the tasks of the classroom. I didn't know what to do.

Taking away everyone's phone at the beginning of each class seemed infantilizing, went against my pedagogy of supported autonomy, but after a few weeks into the second semester of looking out at a sea of young men "slyly" sneaking glances under their desks and asking "huh?" a great percentage of the time I asked them to do in-class tasks, I decided to go through with it.

I framed the cell phone quarantine as an experiment, which it was, to some extent. I told them that I was going to take their phones for a month and we were going to "see what happened," though if I'm to be honest, I expected that this would have immediate positive effects on their attention. I handed out a sheet explaining the research around cell phone use and distraction that had led to my rationale in doing this "experiment." The handout explained that students who were not distracted by access to their cell phones, took more notes, remembered lectures better and got, on average, a full letter grade better than those who did not have access to their phones (Kuznekoff). I outlined Damrad-Frye and Laird's study that indicates that low-

level distractions such as a television playing at a barely perceptible volume in the next room made subjects more bored than high level distractions, like a television playing at high volume, but that subjects attributed the boredom to the initial task as opposed to the distraction (the barely perceptible T.V.) (Damrad-Frye and Laird). “Don’t you see?” I pleaded, “Your phones are probably making you *more* bored!” The students seemed unconvinced, and any arguments I was making were mostly overshadowed by what the students saw as the power play of my taking away their phones. In a way, it was a power play, as I had the power to impose rules, but I really did hope to prove to them their attention would improve once they weren’t tethered to their phones.

The one bit of research they *were* interested in, though, was the research explaining the dopamine loop: the thrill we find when *seeking* drugs (or sex or gambling or other external rewards.) Again: it is the seeking, not the reward itself that gives the seeker the “shot” of dopamine. I explained that the rush from dopamine jars us from the attention we feel when we’re “in the zone” like when we’re playing football, or totally engaged with what we’re writing. And when we keep checking our texts all the time, we keep getting these shots of dopamine, whether or not someone is texting us back, which jars us out of engaged attention and makes it harder to get back into the zone.

A number of them did admit they felt addicted to their phones, but as a class, they were unhappy about the experiment. Isaiah said he felt like when I took their phones, they were going to have to “look for that dopamine somewhere else, Ms. Hall,” a statement which I laughed off at

the time. Likewise, I balked at the complaint that many of them worried they might miss important texts—after all, the class was an hour and fifteen minutes long, and I felt they should be able to live without texting for at least that long.

I had them write their thoughts about the experiment down. Daniel wrote: “Stupid as Hell man come on,”⁹ but when asked what he was worried about most regarding the experiment, he wrote, “my addiction to my phone.” Isaiah wrote, “I disagree with this. I’m a grown ass man. What if I came into your house and took your TV or whatever you like to do? But I still love you homie, but I’m mad at you!!” Anthony wrote, “I think it’s a kid thing. We all grown here. But I think it might work.” This gave me a little hope. Mike, who turned out to be one of the most rebellious participants in this experiment, getting kicked out of class more than once for refusing to give up his phone, for texting in class and even for taking calls (this *after* writing what follows) claimed to be pretty into the idea. He wrote:

I think this experiment is a great idea! The focus of the class will get way better and I believe a lot more work will get done. You can tell during class that a lot of guys including myself are really distracted. This experiment will help me get more done and grow as a writer because I can just focus on class and not on my phone.

That first day, things went fairly well. A couple of the students said class had gone especially quickly, although about five minutes before it was finished, Leonard started literally

⁹ While this might seem somewhat disrespectful, I ask for this level of honesty from my students. It’s important to me that they trust me enough that they don’t feel they need to sugarcoat their feelings. This also helps me understand what I’m up against when I try something new.

whining, “Miss HALL, please lemme see my PHONE.” For homework, I asked them to write a poem, either an ode to their phone, or a description of a time someone had ignored them for their phone. Darius wrote the following ode:

I use my phone for everything. Entertainment, because I watch YouTube videos or listen to music. School because it has internet, and I can type things on it. I can email people off my phone and turn in assignments off of it. I check the time the weather all types of things. White iPhone 6 with a thin case that flips open. Has card slots which contain my most important cards. My most important possession.

Unlike many wealthier students, who have computers on which to do their work, these guys actually read, research and *write* on their phones. Much is made in digital literacy research about the literacies of texting and snapchat, but this—the fact that students without access to other computers use their phones as word processing devices is often overlooked. The line between texting and writing a homework response is blurred in students for whom this is the case and being on their phones in class may seem even more relevant. To Darius, the phone is his “most important possession.” More than one other student referred to their phone as their “baby.”

Jonas wrote this poem about being ignored by his girlfriend for her phone:

Attention

We sat and ate at the Melting Pot,

Her hair was as dark as a screen when that's locked,

Her face lit up like a notification.

Her reflection constantly reminded me of her blue eyes ,

There and then I knew it was time.

We came for fondue,

But she had something more important to do,

A text was better than a conversation.

I snapped whenever she chatted,

Before the night started, her mind was already gone.

In Jonas' poem, we can see a sense of feeling left out, ignored. And while this feeling is certainly more painful when it comes from a significant other, this is some of the trouble when phones are the focus in the classroom¹⁰. It's not that students aren't paying attention. We are *always* paying attention to something, it just might not be what someone else (or even ourselves)

¹⁰ This calls attention to the elephant in the room: gender. Would Jonas have been less upset if he had been ignored by a man? Would the attention structure of the class been different if the instructor had been a white man? A black man? Would a class full of all women been less noisy? Any answers I might provide here would simply be conjecture. I can only say that, as attention structure is social, gender also affects the ways we learn to pay attention and who we learn to pay attention (and perform paying attention) to.

wants us to pay attention to: in this case, Jonas wants his girlfriend to pay attention to him, but she is paying attention to her phone. In my case, I wanted my students to pay attention to the coursework, but they were paying attention to *their* phones. In her article “Distracted by Digital Writing: Unruly Bodies and the Schooling of Literacy,” Stacey Pigg describes a Frontline documentary about reading in which a young woman named Eliza is used as the example of the contemporary American college student, sort of a new Johnny-Can’t-Write, though instead of pulling her hair out over a notebook while a television casts an eerie glow behind her, Eliza is pictured typing on her Blackberry. Pigg points out that while Eliza is described as “distracted by everything,” it seems more that she is “one captivated with rapt attention—but toward a writing technology of her own choosing rather than one sanctioned by professionals” (15). We can see in Jonas’ poem the discomfort he feels when his girlfriend’s rapt attention is directed away from him: first she’s a “screen when that’s locked,” then briefly “her face lit up like a notification” but then “she had something more important to do” and “her mind was already gone.” It’s pretty heartbreaking, honestly.

While much has been made recently of the study of the economics of attention, most research focuses on the individual as having a certain amount of attention, and how that attention gets dispersed. I am interested in attention as a social interaction, distraction as communication. Jonas’ girlfriend’s distraction does not only affect her; it is a message, perhaps unwitting, to Jonas. Attention is not only a private resource, but one whose distribution affects others. Galton was distracted by others’ distraction just as I was distracted by my students’

distraction. And while it's true that students are undertaking literacy acts when they text in class, they're also making moves that have social consequences not just for themselves and the people they're texting, but also for the people in the room they're in. When Eliza pulls out her Blackberry in class, she's not only making a decision about literacy, as Pigg seems to suggest, but she's also making a social statement about who she wants to pay attention to and who she wants to lock out.

Jonas wasn't the only writer who felt hurt by being ignored for a phone. This was a pretty consistent theme throughout the responses. But despite these keen observations and feelings of abandonment for technology, after the first day, things did not go smoothly with the cell phone quarantine. As Derek N. Mueller says in his article "Digital Underlife in the Networked Writing Classroom," "Peripheral or distal communication. . . can be suppressed, but *not without consequences*. These consequences have implications for both teachers and students when negotiating the attention structures of the classroom" (241, italics added). I believe Mueller is indicating that students will no longer engage in what he calls a "digressive, wandering curiosity" (241) when stripped of their phones, perhaps imagining a bored, but quiet room. Silence did *not* ensue in my classroom. I was not prepared for the absolute wildness, the *noise* that ensued when students were stripped of their phones. While I'd found his complaint that they'd have to "look for that dopamine" elsewhere initially ridiculous, I was forced to admit that there may have been something to Isaiah's warning—without their phones, students were visibly (and audibly) agitated. Many of them secretly held onto the phones, so I had to collect them

mid-class, spending much more time as a disciplinarian than I can stand. The constant complaint was “I am a grown man!” and as many times as I explained that grown men don’t text in the middle of staff meetings—at least not as obviously as these guys did—they kept texting.

And they were loud. And every class I took their phones from them, they got louder and louder, in a very literal sense. Three weeks into the experiment, they were so loud, I responded by yelling at them at the top of my lungs: “BE QUIET! WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?!” They all fell initially silent, then broke out laughing. Once they’d settled, they explained their agitation about their phones, and also a key bit of information: they’d all been part of a class text group. Without their phones, they just had to say everything out loud to each other. I called an end to the experiment a week early.

Before I nailed the coffin shut, however, I asked the students to reflect on what had happened. Most of the writers reported anxiety with the loss of their phones. Some of the guys reported being agitated at not being able to receive texts from home. This time, I listened. The texting *was* noisy, but they were texting for a reason. Needing to be connected to home may seem like a strange complaint in a class that lasts an hour and fifteen minutes, but as you will see throughout this semester, these guys had good reason to need to be connected to home. Victor had had multiple family members murdered and Jonas had received a call telling him his brother had been killed just weeks before the school year began. Darius, too, found his grandmother, who had raised him after his parents died, dying on the steps trying to reach her own phone to call 911. Isaiah’s brother had recently gotten out of prison. Being separated from

their phones *was* stressful. A few of them reported feeling like they'd lost a friend when they'd lost their phones. Cameron reported, "[I] kept reaching in my pocket grabbing for nothing." Removing the phones created a different type of noise, but did not eliminate distraction or increase engagement.

Daniel brought up a sentiment that ran through a number of the responses. "It was crazy for me not to have my phone," he wrote. "I felt like I was going through withdrawals." And as I said, many of them were acting this way: fidgety, agitated, distracted. But then, Daniel went on to say something that fascinated me: "it was hard because we didn't have anything to keep us quiet while learning."

What does this mean? Daniel wasn't the only person to say something like this. Five (out of nineteen) of the guys said they needed something to quiet them down while learning or writing. It seems that students felt some agitation and the phones provided some salve to that agitation. Noise requires work, but quiet also requires work. In a research report for cell phone companies trying to capitalize on users' boredom in order to sell more apps, researchers cite a study by Wilson et. al that, found in a study in which people's phones were removed, "people preferred to *self-administer electric shocks* rather than being left alone with their thoughts for a few minutes." This revelation causes the researchers for the cell phone council to conclude "given that bored people long for stimuli and that human attention has become scarce and increasingly valuable, there is commercial value in knowing when a person is bored" (Pielot et.

al 826. Italics added). While their phones were a source of distraction for my students, the silence of removing them was also a source of seemingly painful distraction.

2.2 THE NOISES OF HOME

This brings me to the idea of “white noise,” an oddly named phenomenon meant to signify a sound that, in the words of Baruch College Professor Timothy Aubry, is “an impersonation, a simulation of silence” (Aubry). There are a number of different ways to define white noise, some of which I’ll get into shortly, but generally, “white noise” refers to sound or other information that encourages productivity while at the same time being easy to ignore.

White noise machines are used to increase productivity especially in workplaces, because industrial noises, talking, or silence itself are simply too distracting. The phenomenon of white noise was discovered in 1943 when fighter pilots realized they couldn’t hear each other talking over the sound of the jet engine (Aubry). The name “white noise” is meant to be analogous to “white light.” That is, just as white light contains all frequencies of light, so too, does white noise supposedly contain all frequencies of sound. This is more or less true for the jet engine, but less true for contemporary white noise machines, which contain fewer frequencies. It turns out the broad-spectrum sound of the jet engine isn’t soothing enough that many people can get much work done with it playing in the background. What is now commonly called white noise is almost always a combination of white noise, “pink noise”(noise which excludes higher

frequencies) and “brownian noise” (a low roar resembling a waterfall). Within a decade of its discovery, this revamped concept of white noise had been rebranded to “refer to soothing useful sounds rather than irritating ones” (Aubry). So while *true* white noise (the jet engine) irritates, the noise currently coded as white, supposedly *helps* us pay attention to work instead of requiring us to do work to listen to it.

As you might imagine, different people have different relationships to attention and noise. I personally am distracted to agitation by white noise machines, a phenomenon I attribute to trauma. Most things that are meant to soothe vigilance have the opposite effect on me: sleeping pills keep me up all night, for example. To me, this makes perfect sense: some part of me, deeply engrained, is hyper-alert to threats to my vigilance. My writing process is, in some ways, a complicated dance in which I try to balance not being distracted by noises (which sidetrack me easily) while, at the same time not being distracted by silence. Many of my colleagues and students write in public or with music playing, neither of which I can stand. Alternately, many of my students find writing in silence incredibly distracting.

I’m reminded of a particular incident with a student, Malcolm, who listened to music as he wrote in class (a practice I allow). “Hey Ms. Hall,” he called one day, “you want to hear this?” When I put on his headphones, I was blown away, almost literally, by the sheer volume of the music. This brings up some interesting points: first of all, loud and disruptive as this music may have seemed to me, it seems to have been functioning as a productive sound for Malcolm, either because a loud volume helped keep him awake—the football players had been up since five in

the morning and worked out for usually five hours before coming to my class—or perhaps because this soundscape, more than that of traditional “white noise” quelled the anxiety Malcolm felt of sitting with his thoughts. Malcolm was a straight-A student and an excellent writer, and I’ll admit to being surprised that listening to eardrum-splitting music was part of his process. That said, it might make sense that loud, rhythmic noises would calm hypervigilance or other forms of distraction for some more successfully than the steady hum of white noise, if one were more accustomed to (or at least more comfortable in) a loud, rhythmic soundscape.

But another thing strikes me about the music Malcolm was listening to: there was nothing “white” about it, either in range of frequency or in cultural coding. If I remember correctly, he was listening to African American hip-hop artist Gucci Mane—at a volume, as I’ve mentioned, loud enough to drown the sounds of academia out. The music of youth, especially the music of black youth, has a long history of being labeled “noise.” And while the term may supposedly come from the light spectrum, it is hard to ignore the racial coding here. “White” noise is good noise, or at least noise benign enough to ignore.

But it’s important to note that, as we see with Malcolm’s example, noises that aren’t coded as white noise also comfort. And the same noises don’t comfort everyone—why would they? If noise is a disturbance of the status quo, perhaps the *disturbance itself* is comforting. Perhaps that very disturbance has the potential to remind the listener of self or home in an environment that feels far removed from self and home. In his book, *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching*, A. Suresh Canagarajah investigates the marginalia of the

textbooks of Tamil students learning English in Sri Lanka. He finds that the students draw traditional Sri Lankan hairstyles and dress on the books' characters, the titles of songs and films important to Sri Lankan culture, and perhaps predictably, erotic drawings of interactions between characters. Canagarajah points out that "the glosses provide evidence of a vibrant *underlife* in the classroom, where students collaborate in providing social, emotional and psychological sustenance and solidarity against the perceived lifelessness . . . of the course" (92). What may seem at first blush just to be students doodling in the margins are really drawings that "symbolize the counter discourses the students use to detach themselves from the ideologies of the textbook, forestall cultural reproduction, and construct for themselves more favorable subjectivities and identities" (91). These are disruptions that are doing a lot of work, not to take the students out of the class, but to make them able to feel comfortable within it.

Before I discuss *underlife* directly, I would like to revisit, for a moment, the idea of the dopamine loop. Dopamine, while it is a brain chemical, is not divorced from the social world any more than the brain is divorced from the person whose head carries it around. The rush one feels when checking one's phone for a text is not just some random chemical addiction without any relation to emotion or the culture in which the phone is found, but rather, the rush resulting from the search for connection in that very world. Phones are not just computer and screens, but rather, they are carriers of voices and pictures of self and home, people who like us or even love us (or more compelling yet, people we want to like and love us,) voices that remind us of ourselves outside of the classroom or the office. As Daniel Gross points out:

It is *trivially true* and therefore uninteresting to assert that everything human . . . has some localizable and theoretically measurable manifestation in the brain . . . Neuroscientists of emotion are indeed studying something interesting to do with the amygdala and other brain functions tied up with the experience and expression of emotion. But they are not studying the social brain with an adequate understanding of what it means to be social (34-35).

Like Malcolm's musical choice, or the Tamil students' drawings, text messages may hold great value to a student who feels like an outsider in a college classroom. In 1987, Robert Brooke published his seminal article "Underlife and Writing Instruction," in which he describes the non-assigned activities students undertake during class, which in 1987 included passing notes and reading the school newspaper, as the "underlife" of the class. Contemporary examples would include sending text messages and surreptitiously listening to music. These activities are all undertaken when the students are supposed to be giving the teacher or their schoolwork their "undivided" attention, an attentional state which does not exist. "Even in the most docile class hour," Brooke writes, "such activities are constantly going on, and (significantly) they are usually connected to the class activities in some way" (144). According to Brooke, underlife interactions are not meant to simply pass the time or to pass the class, but primarily to establish identity. He takes the term "underlife" from sociological theory where it "refers to those behaviors which undercut the roles expected of participants in a situation—the ways an employee, for example, shows she is not just an employee but has a complex personality outside

that role” (141). In other words, underlife is more complicated than simple rebellion. The student shows herself as a student, but also as a person with an identity outside the classroom.

Establishing identity does matter in underlife behaviors, but so does making connections—both in and outside of the classroom. These connections may be particularly important for those who feel threatened by the classroom identities offered to them, for those who feel they are losing something culturally in diction, in communication or in soundscape in the classroom environment. When Brooke observes students in a class in which the discussion topic is how many ways they can think about something as simple as a potato, and the students, naturally, turn to a private discussion of making vodka, but do not share this discussion, for obvious reasons, with the professor, Brooke sees this as a “creative use for classroom activities. . . purposefully different from those the teacher intended” (144) and “a retreat from class participation [which] applied [a class] concept in a highly creative and accurate way” (145). I don’t argue with either of these assessments. But I would also add that this giggling and sort of on-task discussion brought that little group of students together. Texting and passing notes are not just ways to establish identity in class while engaging in (or disengaging from) the tasks of the course, they are also ways to establish social connections. My students’ group text was a way of furthering their sense of community with each other and their texts with people outside the class were ways of connecting as well.

Brooke characterizes underlife in two ways: as either disruptive, that which disrupts the status quo¹¹ of the class, or contained (which happens alongside the work of the classroom, when attention is divided between class task and related, but more private tasks. In 2009, Derek Mueller wrote a follow-up article entitled “Digital Underlife in the Networked Writing Classroom” in which he adds a third category to underlife in the classroom: productive. He writes “we find that the communication and learning at the periphery, often beyond the purview of the teacher or speaker, is commonly interlinked and potentially productive” (245). The problem with this categorization, aside from the fact that he does not discuss the social aspect of the class either, is that by categorizing some underlife tasks as “productive,” he categorizes others as “not productive.” And his examples are fairly unreflective. He asks, of students logging on to a course web page during class: “Is it ‘productive’ when a student glances fresh content churning into Google Reader in the brief inventive moments after a teacher has gone over a new writing assignment? Who can say?” (247).

Actually, I find this question pretty easy to answer: yes. *I* will be the one to say that it is productive for students to partake in class-related behaviors while in class, even though those tasks may not be exactly what the instructor asked them to do or may take place on the computer or phone. It seems pretty hard to argue against the idea that it’s productive when a student looks some pertinent information up on Wikipedia or checks the course website. There may be a scholar or two prepared to argue against me, but generally, I don’t think this is the hill

¹¹ You’ll recall that “disrupting the status quo” is the definition I use of “noise.”

many contemporary literacy scholars are willing to die upon. But there are more difficult questions to answer. For example: Is it productive to have the computer open for class tasks, but then inadvertently check email every fifteen minutes? Is it productive to send emojis to every other student in class? To blast Gucci Mane? If not, why not? If it is not “productive” to do these things, what should students do with these strong desires for dopamine and connection in a class that is meant to teach them better ways to communicate?

I would argue that expecting students’ actions in the classroom, underlife or otherwise to always be obviously productive, falls into Steven Hammer’s “myth of noiselessness.” We don’t know what actions will be “productive,” what will be “white noise” and what will just be noisy noise, if there is such a thing—a discard pile of information that ought never have been uttered, moves and marks that ought never have been made. Perhaps, instead of trying to shut down *every* disruption we would be better served by asking “what is being accomplished by this disruption?” “What work is this disruption asking us to do—and why?” from time to time.

We can’t know which noises will be useful until after the fact, and we can’t pay attention to every noise—the microeconomics of attention make this impossible; one brain can only pay attention to so much. Perhaps we can begin by noticing what is being disrupted and then turn to the *way* it is being disrupted. What was that particular disruption trying to say?

I thought the noise of the cell phones and then the cell phone experiment might have been asking for a few things: 1. To change the soundscape of the classroom and 2. To listen more directly to the students about their very strong emotional relationship to their phones. After

observing their general connection to music, I worked with the students to do a music review assignment in which they could talk about the sounds that made them feel at home. It was very difficult to get them to actually describe sounds (they often focused much more on lyrics) and the act of listening made the classroom much louder (there was always music playing,) but the noise became much less chaotic-- or at least I was aware of the noise's purpose. Also, giving my students their phones back and listening to their comments and complaints about the cell phone experiment helped them listen to my complaints about the volume of the classroom.

I did not, as some people might, ask my students to do any public work with the class text or emojis, because, I value the privacy of the students' underlife behavior. Retaining a sense of self, a sense that one can have personal thoughts (*whether or not* they are on-task) helps students feel comfortable in the classroom, as we see in Canagarajah's study of marginalia. So I never saw those texts as any of my business, and I have a sneaking suspicion that the power of the texts would be lost if the students were required to write them.

I didn't finish the experiment with a noiseless student body, or even a student body that would be categorized by most teachers as "well-behaved." We were a rowdy bunch from start to finish. But I'm ambivalent, as I'm sure you've gathered, about "good behavior" anyway.

2.3 CULTURE OF DEFICIT

Our bodies, Hammer points out, are noisy, though we measure them "against a radically

unreachable ideal. Diagnoses signify abnormality, variations from a perfect body which does not exist” (Hammer). Galton himself had several nervous breakdowns, despite his supposedly eminent heritage. It should be clear that I hold nothing against sufferers of nervous breakdowns, only against the idea that some falterings of the body are excusable (in some bodies) while others are not. The idea of “good behavior” bothers me because I believe it’s falsely correlated with goodness in the same way that, say, “good breeding” or even “good health” are falsely correlated with goodness. For students who are not “Good Men” for reasons of gender, race, physical or neurological disability, trauma, or differences of attention, their behavior, facial expression and posture can be misread as disobedience or, as Sami Timimi points out, failure. He writes: “The adherence of [medicine and psychology] to measuring physical and mental competence in order to determine normality inevitably conveys assumptions about deviance and failure and these labels then become attached to individuals and groups who fail to measure up/conform”¹² (Timimi 12). In a sense, they *have* failed—to be the Good Man. But disability, like boredom, like noise, like attention, does not emerge from a vacuum. Disability is not a lack of ability, but a *difference* of ability, as many disability scholars have been asserting for years. As Rosemarie Garland-Tomson puts it, the supposed “deficit” of disability is not located in a “problem body,”

¹² I have had students with ADHD and other learning disabilities, diagnoses which I find out about incidentally (students usually tell me in confidence or sometimes I find out from athletic counselors) but I would find it neither ethical nor instructive to talk about individual student behaviors and diagnoses here. Sometimes I meet with these students to come up with a plan for focusing better in class, or for arranging for extra time for papers. Sometimes I meet with students who have no LD diagnosis to do the same. If a student makes the effort to figure out what they need to best get their literacy work done (or if I see a need,) I don’t require a doctor’s note—and I don’t see why I should.

but instead in the “interaction between bodies and the environment in which they are situated” (qtd in Vidali 43). We can not talk about “disorders” as though they are structural failures of the person in which they are observed without looking at the person doing the observing, without looking at the people and institutions that benefit from labeling other people as “failures.”

For example, take the fidget. We’ve already seen the way Galton benefitted from categorizing fidgeting as an indication of boredom: he published an article about it in which, according to his own narrative, he was able to keep himself interested while his fellow audience members failed to, showing predictable (to him) signs of “mutiny against constraint” (Galton 174). Freud famously pathologized fidgeting in his study of Dora, the subject in his book *Fragments in an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, as indication of excessive masturbation. Here was his line of thinking: Dora fidgeted a great deal with her purse as she told Freud the story of her father making an incestuous sexual advance at her. Freud later connected Dora’s purse to her mother’s jewel case. “Perhaps,” he said to Dora, “you do not know that ‘jewel-case’ is a favorite expression for the same thing that you alluded to not long ago . . . for the female genitals, I mean” (61). This piece of “evidence” helped Freud “prove” that Dora had an Electra complex (that she was, in fact, attracted to her father and wanted to kill her mother), a hypothesis that, while thoroughly disproved, furthered Freud’s career.

By 1957, excessive fidgeting had been labeled “hyperkinetic syndrome,” the fidgeting *itself* an illness, not a symptom of one. It could be cured, it was conjectured, with a new drug called Ritalin that had just been invented two years earlier in 1955 (Hayward 627). Hyperkinetic

Syndrome was the precursor to what is now known as ADHD (though the label Attention Deficit Disorder did not make it into the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual until the 3rd edition in the 1980s¹³). For a while in the '80s, fidgeting was considered one of a family of symptoms of ADHD; now it is considered a behavior that helps people with ADHD focus. According to Dr. Rodrhi Hayward, professor of the History of Medicine at Queen Mary University in London, fidgeting “has moved full circle . . . from a sign of the failure of attention and now reappearing as a tool for managing our attention¹⁴” (627). We can see this in the multi-million dollar popularity among neuroatypicals and neurotypicals alike, of “fidget spinner” toys as aids to focus. The cultural importance of something as human as fidgeting is not, well, static. And people have not only been insulted, institutionalized and diagnosed by these different understandings of fidgeting, but people have also benefitted from these different understandings; fortunes have been made, careers have been built.

¹³ Currently, the ICD-10 (International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems) an international diagnostic manual similar to the DSM and developed by the World Health Organization, describes a condition called “Hyperkinetic *Disorder*” (distinct from Hyperkinetic *Syndrome*, which is no longer a term in circulation.) Hyperkinetic Disorder, as described by the ICD-10 is very similar to ADHD as described by the DSM-5, but requires a younger age of onset for diagnosis and describes a patient with more severe impulse-control difficulties than the average ADHD patient.

¹⁴ Likewise, doodling has recently begun to be seen as a possible aid to concentration. “A specific hypothesis,” writes psychologist Jackie Andrade “is that doodling aids concentration by reducing daydreaming in situations where daydreaming might be more detrimental to performance than doodling itself. This hypothesis is backed up by her experiment, which asked a group of subjects to fill in some small boxes while listening to a list; a focus group was asked to sit still. The doodling group recalled 29% more information from the group than the control (Andrade 103). The exact mechanism by which doodling helps is not known, but most evidence points to it as a boon to concentration.

The same is true of noise. Labeling some sounds and distractions as “white” or productive and others as distracting, disruptive and even belligerent benefits some groups of people while it damages others. If we label noises with absolute qualifiers instead of considering noises as disruptions that affect each person’s environment differently, we ignore the questions: who or what benefits from calling a noise good or bad? And most importantly, what work is this noise asking us to do? Noises, as we’ve seen, are often ways to weave back into the mycelium of underlife and home. In the next chapter, we’ll also see ways in which noisy language becomes its own form of sense-making. And if we write off a noise as not-signal, we’re refusing to do the work the noise is asking of us.

3.0 WHERE SUBJECT AND SYSTEM INTERSECT: STUDENT WRITING AND NGAI'S THEORY OF "STUPLIMITY"

I have now described the considerable number of kinds of the resisting kind of them that I was going to be describing and I have now finished doing this thing. I will now be adding a very few not only of the resisting kind of them but of both resisting and attacking ones to make another generalization but really there have been already done the considerable number of the resisting kinds of them in men and women that I was going to be describing.

The Making of Americans, Gertrude Stein

In her book *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai introduces the term "stuplimity," a combination of shock and boredom that she defines as "a bringing together of what 'dulls' and what 'irritates' or agitates; of sharp, sudden excitation and prolonged desensitization, exhaustion or fatigue... a tension that holds opposing affects together" (271). She borrows from Leo Stein, who describes the "stupidity" of his sister Gertrude's writing thus: "[it is] language that threatens the limits of

the self by challenging [the self's] ability to respond—temporarily immobilizing the addressee, as in situations of extreme shock and boredom” (254). Whether or not Leo Stein means this kindly, one cannot help but notice the power he ascribes to his sister's writing—the ability to paralyze the reader, to “threaten the limits of the self.” Stuplimity, like sublimity, is a powerful force.

While she does use some non-verbal examples of stuplimity (the music of John Cage, for example), Ngai spends a great deal of time outlining a relationship particular to language and boredom. Of Homer Simpson's rant in *The Day of the Locust*, she writes: “the overlapping accretion of phrases and clauses within the boundaries of a severely limited diction results in a language that is paradoxically both ascetic and congested” (255), which is to say that the tension, the conflicting stasis and the anguish of boredom, are housed in the language of the diatribe itself. And this tension gives rise to an exploration—or a crisis: “Homer's ‘thick’ and ‘muddy’ speech invites a critical journey, not into the self, but into the more complex problem of the *self's relationship to a particular kind of linguistic difference that does not yet have a concept assigned to it*” (254. Emphasis added). We might see this “relationship to a particular kind of linguistic difference that does not yet have a concept assigned to it” among students in a first year composition class. That is, students expected to do something called “write academically,” or, in the words of David Bartholomae, “invent the university,” may find themselves flummoxed, as Bartholomae shows us, by their relationship to the linguistic system they are now expected to play a part in. And, as Ngai tells us, “Language is the site where subject and system intersect”

(264).¹⁵ If we, for a moment, imagine an academic language (or really, any unfamiliar language system) as a huge machine, formulaic but daunting—too big to see all the parts, with whirring wheels and stomping pistons, we might also imagine a new practitioner of that language system who has been dropped into this machine: she has to run quite quickly, and with the changing directions of the machine’s gears and hammers to fit in—imagine Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*. For some new practitioners, this could feel fun, but for others it could feel dangerous. It also might feel quite tedious, especially if one gets caught running around the same syntactic or conceptual wheel, not knowing how to hop off. Stuplime writing is a textual expression of the boredom and anxiety of one’s relationship to the machine, but it is more than that. It is a noise that disrupts the machine, transferring that boredom and anxiety from the writer to the reader. That is to say, stuplimity is a boredom that attacks.

Nathaniel West, John Cage and Gertrude Stein use language in order to purposefully shock and bore readers by barraging them with repetitive and seemingly nonsensical strings of words. In these examples, the sharp light of the stuplime is meant to reveal the reader’s position as a cog, something students may be doing as well—perhaps purposefully, perhaps not. We can think of stuplimity as a kind of noise, one which resists being ignored, while at the same time resisting being labeled as “coherent.” We can dismiss stuplime writing as bad, lazy writing, *or* we

¹⁵ Also, as Lester Faigley points out: “because people in technologically advanced nations encounter more competing discourses than ever before, the construction of meaning is now extraordinarily complex and problematic” (217), which is to say, there are more language systems to use, be used by, choose from and be confused by.

can see it as, as Ngai writes of the avant-garde's stiplime, writing that "forces the reader to *go on*, in spite of its equal enticement to readers to give up. . . pushing us to formulate *new tactics for reading*" (272. Italics added). I choose to use these examples of student writing to formulate new reading tactics, whether or not asking me to do so was the writer's intent, because I believe there is some meaning in the noise. I also hope that from these beginnings we might work toward a pedagogy that strengthens student agency further, despite the fact that stiplime writing seems to often arise from a feeling of powerlessness against linguistic and social machines that the writers feel controlled by.

In the pages that follow, I use examples from student writing in a pre-transfer-level writing course (one separate from the football course I mention in Chapter Two) that I believe represent stiplime writing. I make no assumptions about the intentions of the student writers based on their writing samples. It's not my goal to find examples of stiplime student writing in order that I may diagnose and eventually cure student boredom. First of all, as I mention earlier, it's impossible to tell if a student, or anyone else for that matter, is bored—there is no posture unique to boredom, no tone of voice. Even the announcement "I'm bored," can mean anything from "I'm hungry," to "I'm angry," to "I don't understand and I don't care." I've argued elsewhere in this dissertation that "boredom" is an umbrella term which encompasses countless situations of tension between engagement and disengagement--of which stiplimity is one expression. But most importantly, I'm interested in examining stiplime student writing as noisy

information, information that disrupts for a reason, as work being done. I am not interested in looking at stuplime writing for what it supposedly fails to do.

In the words of Mariolina Salvatori and Patricia Donahue: “When students realize that their teachers ask the same questions of student texts that they ask of the texts they have assigned for class reading [...] they begin to take tremendous pride and great pleasure in this kind of inquiry” (Salvatori and Donahue xiii). If students can see the power of the stuplime in their own writing, it may provide not only opportunities for engagement, but may also allow for students to innovate, like West, Stein and Beckett do. Also, when students recognize the work stuplimity is doing in their own writing, they may be able to move past looking only at the confusion of the stuplime and into looking at the strength of linguistic difference.

On that note, let us look at this example from Beckett:

One night or day then as he sat at his table head on hands he saw himself rise and go. First rise and stand clinging to the table again. Then go. Start to go. On unseen feet start to go. So slow that only change of place to show he went. As when he disappeared only to reappear later at another place again (qtd. in Ngai 255).

This goes on for quite a while- and the character never leaves the table. The paragraph ends, not with any real change in posture, but with his head again, in his hands. Ngai calls this excerpt a “rhetorical enactment of ...fatigue” which occurs “not only through repetition but through a series of constative exhaustions staged through the corrective dynamics of retraction and restatement, of statements partially undoing the completion of preceding statements” (255-

56) A constative speech act declares something. “I am in the car;” “The phone did not ring.” Constative statements are, supposedly, either true or false. What is there to debate if I announce “I’ve stood up from the table?” I either have or I haven’t. And yet, Beckett’s character manages to backpedal from these supposedly true statements. He’s gone. No, he’s started to go. No, he’s started to go “on unseen feet.” The longer the paragraph goes on, the further he’s gotten from leaving—all without getting any closer to staying. Ngai says: “ the logic of progression from statement to statement is paradoxically propelled by a series of implicit or explicit objections continually jerking us backward, resulting in writing that continually calls attention to itself as lacking, even as it steadily accumulates” (256).

3.1 STUPLIMITY AND STRUCTURE

In reading student writing, instructors may focus on the way the text “calls attention to itself as lacking” without the generosity with which we read, for example, Beckett. Like him or not, with the playwright, we assume the lack, the backpedalling, the repetitions serve a purpose. In student essays, we may be tempted to dismiss the writing as sloppy, and despite Mina Shaughnessy’s admonitions, error-filled. Let’s look at an example of student work through this filter of “constative exhaustions” in order that we might see how the writer, like Beckett, utilizes,

knowingly or not, the force of the stuplime. Here is an essay on “Bartleby, the Scrivener” in which the student, Mora, was asked to consider the fact that it is impossible to say for certain what drives Bartleby to do what he does (which one might argue is to enact a stuplime language act of his own) and therefore to explain how she understood Bartleby’s actions—that is, what about her own experiences or previous readings had led her to read Bartleby the way she did.

Here is an excerpt from her response:

Herman Melville’s character Bartleby in the story, “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street” about a scrivener, in particular, one named Bartleby... is a mysterious man of very few words. Bartleby is a very confusing man whose favorite and essentially only words you would hear come out of his mouth are “I would prefer not to” or “no.” Now why was Bartleby a man of few words? Everybody wonders but nobody actually knows, so, all we can do is infer.

Here it is the writer, not the character, who does not get up from the table. She makes a number of constative statements that at first blush add up to very little: Bartleby is a character in the story “Bartleby the Scrivener,” which is about a scrivener named Bartleby. He is a mysterious man. He is a confusing man. Nobody knows why he does what he does so we just have to guess. Unlike Beckett, Mora doesn’t so much retract previous statements as she rephrases similar statements, a sort of constative stutter, all of which seem to indicate that she doesn’t understand what makes Bartleby tick and she doesn’t particularly care. One might argue that she’s trying her best in this passage to invent the university, to, in Bartholomae’s words “carry off the bluff” of

academic writing (Bartholomae 61). This may very well be true—she may be trying to sound academic in the way she best knows how—or she may be trying to express confusion or apathy, but whatever she is attempting, this incessant pounding on one note has the effect, as does the Beckett excerpt of, “a rhetorical enactment of fatigue,” which is in itself meaningful. “What Poe, West and Beckett suggest,” Ngai writes, “is when language thickens, it suffers a ‘retardation by weak links’ slowed down by the absence of causal connectives that would propel the work forward” (256) and as we can see in this excerpt, Mora’s writing either refuses or is unable to move. Reading the above paragraph caused me an almost instantaneous boredom, which in fact, might be the point of such a paragraph. In Ngai’s words: “the loss of strong links in the text paradoxically strengthens the affective link between text and reader, transferring the text’s ‘stupor’ to him or her” (257). It enacts the stuplime “attack” I mention earlier. Ngai’s argument with writers like Beckett and Stein is that this transfer provides “small subjects” with a small bit of resistance against larger systems, perhaps the only power they have. So how might this student writer make use of this resistance?

Stuplime works, Ngai tells us, “tend to draw us down into the sensual and material domain of language and its dulling and irritating iterability, rather than elevating us to a transcendent, supersensible or spiritual plane” (267). Mora’s repetition and rephrasing of her idea is certainly dulling and irritating, but there is power to this drawing down. She has enacted a Bartlebyan refusal of her own by repeating one idea and preferring not to move forward. Her language is a kind of trap. It’s important to note that Mora is repeating herself, much as Bartleby

himself does—and Bartleby’s repetition has a great deal of power, both on the story’s narrator and on the readers of the story. Boredom is a power Melville and Bartleby (and perhaps myself) wield over Mora. With this in mind, it would be useful for her to look carefully at *everything* Bartleby says in the story. It turns out to be quite a bit more than “I prefer not to.” Below is a list, in order, of all of the things Bartleby says in the entire “Story of Wall-Street”:

“I would prefer not to”; “I would prefer not to”; “what is wanted?”; “I would prefer not to”; “I would prefer not to”; “I prefer not to”; “I would prefer not to”; “I would prefer not to”; “I *prefer* not”; “I prefer not to”; “I would prefer not to”; “I would prefer not to”; “At present I prefer to give no answer”; “At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable”; “I would prefer to be left alone here.”

Mid-story the narrator reports that Bartleby has told him he will do no more writing. When the narrator exclaims “no more writing?” Bartleby replies: “No more.” When the narrator asks the reason, Bartleby replies “Do you not see the reason for yourself?” From this moment forward, Bartleby’s mantra begins to vary quite a bit. He says the following:

“I have given up copying”; “I would prefer not”; “Not yet; I am occupied”; “I would prefer *not* to quit you”; “Sitting upon the banister”; “No; I would prefer not to make any change”; “There is too much confinement about that”; “No, I would not like a clerkship, but I am not particular”; “I would prefer not to take a clerkship”; “I would not like it at all; though, as I said before, I am not particular”; “No, I would prefer to be doing something else”; “Not at all. It does not strike me that there is any thing definite about

that. I like to be stationary. But I am not particular”; “No: at present I would prefer not to make any change at all”; “I know you and I want nothing to say to you”; “I know where I am.” And his final words: “I prefer not to dine to-day. It would disagree with me; I am unused to dinners.” (Melville 1-26).

We can see here that, though he begins by repeating “I would prefer not to,” as the story goes on, Bartleby says a great deal more than that. In fact, he becomes relatively verbose after his interaction with the narrator about doing no more writing. I’m not sure what exactly to make of Bartleby’s repeated announcement that he is “not particular” or his declaration that he knows where he is (the Tombs,) but it is clear from this list that Bartleby strikes more than just one note. Later in this dissertation, I go into more depth about the importance of play and experiment to agency and attention . With this in mind, were I to teach Bartleby again, I might give an assignment in which I asked students to pick a mantra of their own, perhaps similar to Bartleby’s “I prefer not to,” a phrase they might say when confronted with writing or other tasks to which they feel an aversion. I would then ask them, with Bartleby’s actual speech in mind, to repeat, with slight variations, their own mantra, imagining the different situations in which they were being asked to perform. As a follow-up, I might ask them to take on the role of Bartleby’s employer—that is, to go in as an outsider and provide narration describing the circumstances under which their mantra was delivered. An assignment like this would put Mora’s stiplime language in direct conversation with Bartleby’s and Melville’s, and would also give her a solid starting place to begin revisions, a place where she felt a personal connection. I should also point

out that it seems fairly likely that Mora would have preferred not to do this assignment on *Bartleby* in the first place, that some of the stuplime writing, some of the “machine” she felt trapped in, was the assignment and the course itself. So an assignment that asked her to explicitly respond to that may have been a productive opening—to both engage with the text and value her aversion to it.

Ngai often references a slapstick, farcical quality to the stuplime, as we see above in Mora’s claim that *Bartleby the Scrivener* is “about a scrivener, in particular, one named Bartleby.” If we look at this closely, we see that her commas actually indicate what, in other circumstances, may be thought of as a good sense of comedic timing (and she was a very funny student.) She jumps from this to a pronouncement that *Bartleby* is depressed to an account of her depressed friend to a conclusion which reads: “In conclusion, Bartleby is a mysterious man who is clearly troubled by something. If it is depression, then my hypothesis is correct, which I believe it is.” There is often something parodic about student writing in general, especially that which attempts (sometimes unsuccessfully) to inhabit an unfamiliar form. After all, what is a parody but a savvy misuse of a rhetorical structure, often an in-joke for those who understand that structure and its intended uses? Take the following excerpt from Kenneth Goldsmith’s *MDCLXXXVI* (named after the number of syllables contained in the chapter,) in which Ngai claims “constative fatigue is hilariously performed through an overdetermined self-referentiality and the use of ‘literary devices’ as clichés” (259):

This is the first sentence of the story. This is the second sentence. This is the title of the story which is also found several times in the story itself....This is a sentence that provides an ending to the first paragraph. This is the first sentence of a new paragraph in a self-referential story. This sentence comments on the awkward nature of the self-narrative form while recognizing the strange and playful detachment it affords the writer... (qtd in Ngai 260).

And so on, for 1686 syllables. Here, the self-referentiality is deft and “hilarious,” while the student’s self-referential “in conclusion,” for example, is easily read as inept. In part, this is because the student is not as adept at manipulating the form of, say, the essay, as Goldsmith is with the short story. However, the student work still “confronts the mechanical operations of a finite system, whose taxonomy or combinatory incorporates oneself” (Ngai 276). So one possibility for revising essay, if Mora were interested, would be to suggest that she write the whole thing in a way that draws attention to the ridiculousness of the form itself as Goldsmith has done, as a parody of the essay: (For example: *To begin, let me begin by saying Bartleby is a character in “Bartleby the Scrivener,” which is a story about a scrivener named Bartleby, who scrivens on Wall-Street which is where he works even though he refuses to work because he would prefer to stare at a wall*). I’m not sure she’d be interested in such a task and I wouldn’t want to force it on her; my point here is that the circular organization *is* an organization, at once parodic, rebellious and bored, but structured nonetheless. If Mora begins to make decisions about who she is writing for, about the way she organizes her essay, even if her decision is

somewhat out of the ordinary, the aspects that seem like nonsense and disorder may become strengths.

3.2 HEAPS AS ORGANIZATION

Fredric Jameson described the work of Beckett (along with Ashbury, Cage and the language poets) as “schizophrenic,” hypothesizing that if:

the subject has lost its capacity actively to ...organize its past and future into coherent experience, it becomes difficult to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but ‘heaps of fragments’ and in a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary (qtd in Ngai 286).

But as Ngai points out: “anyone with agricultural, office, laundry or postal experience can attest [that] a heap *is* an organization, though perhaps not a particularly organized-looking one” (291). She argues that if we only allow pre-existing concepts of order to count as coherent, we bar ourselves from discovering new processes of linguistic adhesion, the type of which we see in, for example, Beckett and Stein.¹⁶ While we see the beginnings of this adhesion in the student example above, I would like to look at another example which seems to follow its own rules for

¹⁶ In other words, I am not arguing for an Elbowian pedagogy of free writing, meant to liberate writers from the preciousness of language, a stream-of-consciousness disorder that will later be tidied up and organized for public consumption, I am arguing for new forms of organization that make readers rethink how we make sense of and through language.

sticking together—in this case, a paper about the domestic violence scandal between Ray Rice and his then-fiancé, now-wife, Janay Rice. The writer, Greg, is clearly offended by Rice’s behavior, but also gets a bit perplexed when it comes to discussion of the victim, who he sometimes pities and other times accuses of being just as bad as the perpetrator because she married him anyway. This is the paper’s conclusion:

People need to be more affectionate and realize that hurting others is something they need to stop doing. And if you are being abused and aren’t making an attempt to stop it or alerting the authorities about it you are just as bad as the person abusing you... Even years after you could be leaving that partner in a stage of depression and they could repeat those acts of abuse on others in the future. Abuse has a tumbling affect to carry on from one person to another and as humans we need to make a conscious effort to keep slowing it down until it completely stops. Domestic violence is not a joke and needs to become more public. I will end on this note, do you feel good about putting others down or is there a reason as to why you do it? We, as humans need to come up with more ways to help the other people around us and end this horrible and cowardly act.

Here, the writer stops and starts, lurches forward and jerks back, not only in what he is saying, but in who he is addressing. His language is not constative, but directive: Be more affectionate (here he addresses a general “everyone”) stop abusing (here he addresses the abuser) leave your abuser (he addresses the victim) if you leave him he may get depressed and do it again (this time he appears to compel the victim to stay lest she upset the abuser further) the people

you abuse will abuse others (back to the abuser) stop joking around (this was probably directed at me, since this was a satire assignment, the satire of which he completely ignored, or more likely, refused) make the problem more public (again the general everyone) what is wrong with you? (abusers and maybe me again) We need to help abusers and their victims (everyone who is not an abuser or a victim). This is a heap of fragments, to be sure. On the one hand, the writer appears to simply write whatever comes to mind. On the other, his mad grasp for an audience brings with it a certain desperation, a frantic tenor that seems oddly appropriate to the subject matter of domestic violence. It is a directive scattershot, aiming at everyone and no one in particular, hoping it might make a hit. Again, there's a power to this, but the power gets somewhat lost in the conclusion of a freshman composition essay, which up to this point, follows (albeit limply) the five-paragraph format and tries to take as its central argument the idea that "domestic violence is bad." The *strength* of the essay is actually in the writer's failure to find the proper audience to which to direct his admonitions.

To tell Greg to "work on his organization," or to "pick one audience" would erase the very power of this essay. And, after all, who should he address his directive to? In effect, this paragraph calls out: "stop this!" while drawing attention to the terrible realization that there is actually no one addressee who can make domestic violence stop. "Most teaching," writes Hephzibah Roskelly, "is always an order-affirming, chaos-denying experience for students, with workshop groups on revision containing the implicit imperative to weed out the inappropriate in favor of the meticulously controlled with free writing inevitably giving way to MAJOR ESSAY

#1” (Roskelly 103). If we ask the student to follow a traditional outline (topic, evidence, analysis) or clarify his argument, we lose the panic of this paper and in so doing, we deny the very appropriate chaos he’s expressing here. On the other hand, a reader has to do some fairly intensive analysis to pinpoint where the meaning or even the stuplimity of this paragraph lies. So what might be a next step for Greg to work with the productive disorder of this essay? Roskelly cites Ann Berthoff’s phrase: “a concept is like a hand that gathers. It is also the handful” (101). That is, according to Roskelly, “when writers name, in other words, they don’t just begin the chaos, they begin *the dialogue between order and chaos*” (101. Emphasis added). To get Greg to name his multiple audiences, to reflect upon the importance and frustration of those multiple audiences might be a good first step toward looking at the power he has as a writer to transfer his feeling of being dumbfounded onto his readers as well as to reflect upon the difficulty and complexity of the situation he’s describing here. In short, if Greg were to revise this piece, he could revise it with *multiple* audiences in mind, with a structure that fit those multiple audiences.

3.3 THE CLOG IN THE MACHINE

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3.4 THE HISTORY OF THE STUPLIME

Here, I would like to turn to a few well-known examples of student writing that I think of as stuplime in the hopes that we can see what the study of textual heaping and the embrace of disorder can add to the extant discussion of pedagogy, as well as what the study of writing pedagogy can add to the discussion of the stuplime. It seems fitting to begin with an excerpt from Mina Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations*, which views student writing with a generous eye, putting a great deal of thought into why students who are placed in remedial tracks write the way they do—into what intellectual work they are doing as opposed to what they are failing to do. Shaughnessy looks at the logic and intent behind these errors in order that we, as instructors, might respect the intellectualism of the students. “Errors,” she writes, “are the result not of carelessness or irrationality, but of *thinking*” (Shaughnessy 105). It is also true, however,

that the book sets out to “improve” those students’ skills—or, in other words, to make their writing more error-free and academically palatable.

I don’t mean this entirely disparagingly. In the words of Thomas Rickert: “Such skills are [...] often those most necessary for tapping the power that writing can wield.” But Shaughnessy’s focus on syntactical, organizational and grammatical skills comes with some cost. Thomas Rickert asks: “In learning such skills, however, we should also ask what students are not learning. What other forms of writing and thinking are being foreclosed or distorted, forms of writing that have their own, different powers?” (Rickert 290)¹⁸.

Shaughnessy herself alludes to one of these powers (though probably not one that Rickert was referring to) in her discussion of bureaucratic writing. She footnotes Wilfred Sheed’s commentary on the Watergate hearings. Sheed writes:

Mull the marvelous language...not just the familiar examples, but the whole cunningly flaccid tone of it[...] The bureaucratic mind recoils from active verbs because they fix responsibility [...] The petty official abandoning ship becomes passive in every pore, barely breathing: perhaps we’ll take him for a passenger (qtd in Shaughnessy 86).

Here we can see the power of the language of bureaucracy—it may even save a guilty man from a prison sentence—and all without explicitly telling a lie. He can, in Ngai’s words, continue to maintain his function while at the same time going limp. Shaughnessy draws a connection between student writing and the writing of the bureaucrat. She writes: “Unwittingly, and out of a

¹⁸ I discuss my fraught relationship with (and opinion on) teaching Standardized English in Chapter Five.

tentativeness that is not of his making, the inexperienced writer draws upon the same passive constructions, the same circumlocutions and evasions as the bureaucrat, who uses these syntactic strategies deliberately, as a way of blurring or suppressing information” (86). But she goes on to explain that we need to teach students to write, not as bureaucrats, but to write, in her words, “well.” I’ll admit—I don’t find much pleasure in the language of bureaucracy. In fact, I don’t even *read* most of the privacy agreements and electric bill contracts I receive—but my God, what powerful language it is—that which repulses us enough that we refuse to even read the things we’re signing. And whether or not we like it, whether or not we think it’s “good” writing, we can discuss with our students what the uses of that power may be, whether the students themselves are wielding the language, or whether it is being used against them. Let’s take the following student example from Shaughnessy’s book, which she describes as being written in “formalese” and “an effort to approximate the high or formal style of academia”:

It can be said that my parents have led useful live but that usefulness seems to deteriorate when they found themselves constantly being manipulated for the benefit of one and not for the benefit of the community. If they were able to realize that were being manipulate successful advancements could have been gained but being that they had no strong political awareness their energies were consumed by the politicians who saw personal advances at the expenses of dedicated community workers [...]

I must maintain a level of awareness to make sure that I can bring about positive actions and to keep an open mind to the problems of the community and to the possible

manipulation machinery which is always on the watch when progressive leaders or members of the community try to build effective activities for the people to participate (197).

This writer is responding to the bureaucrats in power with the obfuscated language of bureaucracy. But what is he telling us? The meaning is so couched in passive constructions, it is difficult to find. However, we can figure out that someone—and someone powerful—has manipulated the writer’s parents for personal gain and the writer is determined to fight against that powerful someone. Shaughnessy offers the possibility that the writer is “struggling to develop a language that will enable him to talk analytically, with strangers, about the oppression of his parents” or that he may be looking for a language “that protects him from the curiosity and sentimentality of strangers” (198). But as Min-zhan Lu points out of the passage: “these ‘strangers’ enjoy power relationships with the very ‘politicians’ and ‘manipulation machinery’ against whom this writer is resolved to fight” (Lu 32). That is, this language also hides the details of the slight against the writer’s parents, as well as the identity of the person who has manipulated them. The writer’s obfuscation may serve to protect the writer and his parents from more than curiosity or sentimentality, but from the “manipulation machinery” itself. Shaughnessy writes: “From its origin, writing has been a way of protecting important facts, events or creations from the transformations of time and space”(85). This is true, but it’s not the whole story. Writing has also been a way of protecting important facts from being revealed. In the words of Peter Elbow: “Language can be used not only to convey meaning, but also to

disguise it. We characteristically use words so people will understand us; but sometimes we use them so they *won't*—or at least so some people won't” (16).

In other words, the writer is being *inscrutable*, a term Jerry Won Lee explores at length in his book *The Politics of Translingualism: Beyond Englishes*. Lee writes, “A common complaint, especially in response to the writing by students who are users of peripherazlized Englishes, is its sheer inscrutability” (91), which is one of the reasons Shaughnessy has chosen this excerpt, in the hopes she might help the student achieve “clarity.” But Lee brings up a few points about inscrutability that Shaughnessy does not seem to realize might be at play in this excerpt. First of all, as I mention above, students are sometimes inscrutable on purpose. It is possible this writer is purposefully hiding the details of his parents’ situation to save them (and himself) the embarrassment of revealing the circumstances surrounding their “manipulation.” Another point, one often overlooked, is that standardized English itself is also quite inscrutable, with an endless and constantly-changing catalog of rules. Many writers, both bureaucrats and writers of literature could be classified as inscrutable, but as readers, many of us have decided we either want to ignore their writing and go along with what they say (in the case of the bureaucrat) or, in the case of the artist, *we* want to bear the onus of learning to read them properly. In other words, there is no inherent standard of inscrutability, there is only the amount of work the reader is willing to do to understand the words on the page. And the decision of who deserves that attention is politically motivated.

Now let us look at a famously inscrutable example of student writing, one which is far from the exaggerated civility and formality of the bureaucrat but still employs “a series of [...]objections continually jerking us backward, resulting in writing that continually calls attention to itself as lacking” (Ngai 256). Geoffrey Sirc calls this essay “a self-cancelling text, a self-failing gesture” (Sirc 25); Thomas Rickert calls it an “act’ that has sophisticated transgressive potential” (Rickert 309), and David Bartholomae calls it “the ‘Fuck You’ paper” (Bartholomae 314). The essay was written by a young man named Quentin Pierce for the first freshman English course Bartholomae ever taught. The prompt was to read an essay by Sartre and to answer the question “if existence precedes essence, what is man?” Here is Pierce’s reply:

If existence precedes essence man is responsible for what he is.

This is what stinger is trying to explain to us that man is a bastard without conscience I don’t believe in good or evil they or meaningless words or phase. Survive is the words for today and survive is the essence of man.

To elaborate on the subject matter. the principle of existentialism is logic, but stupid in it self

(here there are crossed out sentences)

Let’s go back to survive, to survive it is necessary to kill or be kill, this what is existentialism all about.

Man will not survive, he is a asshole

STOP

The stories in the books or meaningless stories and I will not elaborate on them. This paper is meaningless, just like the book, But, I know the paper will not make it.

STOP

(here there are crossed out sentences)

I don't care

I don't care

About man and good and evil I don't care about this shit fuck this shit, trash and should be put in the trash can with this shit

Thank you very much

I lose again (Bartholomae 313).

Bartholomae describes this as "a written document of considerable skill and force" (315) and compares Pierce to Ginsberg and Whitman; Sirc compares him to Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols; Personally, I find something Nietzschean in his ferocity ("man is responsible for what he is"), though compared to Pierce, Nietzsche's syntax is quite orderly. Considering the wide range of writers he's being compared to, I think it's clear that whatever Pierce is doing here, it's something at once familiar and new--a new way of heaping ideas together. It's a paper that stuck with Bartholomae for eighteen years before he wrote an article about it, that Sirc wrote about four years after it was published and that Rickert wrote about four years after that. If it had been organized and clearly written, the essay would've been long forgotten, though Pierce would

likely have passed the class (Bartholomae claims to have failed all of his basic writers in that course, so we can assume Pierce didn't make the cut).

Thomas Rickert calls Pierce's essay an "act" (always in scare quotes) which he defines thus: "The 'act' is interested in rupturing the day, in transforming the entire discursive field that determines what is proper and valued. The 'act' refuses accommodation in favor of radical transformation despite the risk of total loss" (312). It is true, I think, that the essay itself does rupture—it certainly had enough impact to stick with Bartholomae, Sirc and Rickert himself. And it would be difficult to argue that the writer isn't risking loss (though I'm not sure if the risk of failing the class constitutes a "total" loss for Pierce). But I think there is some danger in calling the text an "act" and not a "text." At least in Rickert's usage, the term "act" allows for a fairly conjectural discussion of Pierce's motives. For example, Rickert writes that " [Quentin] hates what he has produced just as much as he hates the conditions and forces that were aligned to make him produce it" (313) And "Quentin refuses to find his writing act empowering; he sees that he is being called to enjoy, through his acts of writing, his own continued servitude to himself and the state" (312). It's presumptuous to claim an understanding of the writer's motive—there's no way of knowing if Pierce feels a servitude to himself and the state, and it's disempowering in and of itself to put those words in this writer's mouth. Furthermore, calling Pierce's essay an "act" shifts the focus from the textual to the psychological, thereby further distancing student writing from published writing.

The study of Pierce's text *as a text* with Ngai's theory of stuplimity in mind might lead us toward, in Rickert's own words, a "post-pedagogy" that avoids "the dismissal of writing acts that have unacknowledged value, transgressive or otherwise" (292). I suggest we look at Pierce's unique grammar and syntax not as "act" or error or even evidence of thinking but as an accomplishment. And what does Pierce accomplish? "A careful reading of Quentin's paper," writes Rickert, "shows that it *disrupts* the exchange circuit on which successful communication depends" (310, Italics added). That is, in Leo Stein's words, "it immobilizes the addressee" (Ngai 254) or Aya's words, the writer becomes a "clog in the machine."

As in Beckett, Pierce's text is full of declarations and contradictions. Take, for example: "survive is the essence of man" and the conflicting constative: "Man will not survive, he is a asshole," or the repeated "STOP," after which he does not stop but continues writing. Pierce addresses the reader directly ("thank you very much"); he devolves into inarticulate swearing ("I don't care about this shit fuck this shit, trash and should be put in the trash can with this shit") and he fails himself before the teacher can do the failing ("I know the paper will not make it"). The paper makes noise, it disrupts—but who or what is it disrupting? The reader? Bartholomae? The educational system? Pierce himself? Or all of the above? If Pierce wanted to stop Dave Bartholomae and numerous composition scholars in their tracks, he did that quite successfully. If he wanted to impact composition pedagogy, he did that as well. If he wanted to fail himself from the class, he may have done that too.

But if we are to see stuplime writing as evidence of work begun, and a site from which further work can continue, if Pierce wanted to continue the thwarted accomplishment of the “fuck you” paper, how might he do that? Perhaps he could continue his list of constative statements bulleted by the (in this case) impotent word “STOP.” Perhaps he could make a longer list of the things he doesn’t care about—or he could continue to write conflicting truisms about the nature of man. Or a list of people he would like to address this poem to. Perhaps he could then decide how to organize those lists using his own logic—not that of the simple analytic essay. In his case, I would ask him to write everything down: more heaps of fragments—to see where he’s going. He’s hurtling somewhere headlong (and angrily,) but we don’t really know where yet.

Bartholomae didn’t know what to do with the paper, so put in a drawer for eighteen years, though one must assume that his frustration with the essay and others like it led him to develop the student-centered pedagogy that honored the intellect of Pierce and other students like him found in *Facts, Artifacts and Counterfacts*. Years later, after Bartholomae had established himself as one of the foremost scholars of composition, his success, in part, based on the work he did reading “basic writers” with the same respect we read, say, Whitman or Ginsberg, Bartholomae used the Pierce essay in the article “Tidy House.” Here, Bartholomae argues for the abolition of the term “basic writers,” which he sees being used to separate some styles of writing (formal academic prose) from others (the stuplime disorder of writing like Pierce’s). Bartholomae writes:

To the degree to which the rhetoric of the American classroom has been dominated by the topic sentence, the controlling idea, gathering together ideas that fit while excluding, outlawing those that don't (the overwhelming, compelling specifics); to the degree that the American classroom has been a place where we *cannot* talk about race or class or the history of the American classroom, it has taught both the formal properties and the controlling ideas that produce, justify and value the humanism of [some writers], that produce [the texts of other writers] as confusing, unreadable [...] and it produces basic writing as the necessary institutional response to the (again) overwhelming politics and specifics of difference (318).

In other words, noisy, disruptive, writing has political consequences directly related to the politics of remediation and education. Immediately favoring order favors not only experienced writers but also those who are able to make easy sense of whatever machine they are in—and then to articulate and package that sense in a way that is easy to swallow, as Quentin Pierce's essay is not.

3.5 I HAVE A REPORT DUE AND THERE'S NO OTHER PLACE TO GO

Finally, I'd like to look at a student essay that is particularly difficult to swallow--namely the now infamous "Queers, Bums and Magic." The essay, if you aren't familiar with it, was brought to light in 1991, when Foothill College Instructor Scott Lankford brought it to an MLA workshop

on multiculturalism and political correctness, and then in 1992 presented a paper entitled “How Would you Grade a Gay-Bashing?” at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. The paper is about, among other things, the battery and possible murder of a homeless man at the hands of the paper’s narrator; it is unclear from the text whether the crimes were real or imagined. This essay makes it much more difficult to congratulate the writer for work done than it is with Bartholomae’s, Shaughnessy’s or my own students. In his article “Fault Lines in the Contact Zone,” Richard Miller describes the essay thus:

What makes ‘Queers, Bums and Magic’ so powerful is that it disables the most familiar kinds of conference presentations and teacher responses. Here is writing that cannot easily be recuperated as somehow praiseworthy despite its numerous surface flaws, writing that instead offers direct access to a voice from the margins that seems to belong there.

Upon receiving the essay, Lankford, who is himself gay, not knowing what to do, graded it as though it were a fiction, comparing the battery scene to the ultraviolence in *A Clockwork Orange*, and giving it a low B. Many conference-goers were up in arms about this strategy (a strategy that Lankford himself described as “spineless”) arguing that the student ought to be turned in to the authorities. Miller makes much of the fact that people had made these judgments without reading the essay, though he doesn’t actually quote much of the essay himself. In fact, Miller only quotes one full paragraph– the conclusion. The full text of this essay

has long since been lost, but, with the help of Scott Lankford, who still retained his original notes, I was able to piece together a bit more of it, which follows below:

My friends and I were now on our way to ...the gay capital of america...to make fun of the bums and kick them around...in San Fagcisco. Halfway up on the ride one of my friends shouted out, after we had a couple of beers, "Why are we going to Polk Street?" I replied calmly, "I have a report due and there is no other place to go, besides we can get drunk and piss on the bums"

(The next section is lost, but Lankford reports that it describes urinating on the homeless and accosting a gay man on Polk street with the following: "My friend is doing a survey and wants to know if you're a fag." Then there is an encounter with a drug dealer on Haight Street and then the following scene:)

We stopped for a second to take a leak on a wall, but we did not realize that there was someone sleeping there. I felt a claw grab my ankle, telling me to stop. I was scared for a minute and did not know what to do. I started kicking him and then my friends joined in, because they were drunk and did not know what to do. We finally stopped after about 30 seconds of non-stop blows to the body. One of my friends shouted, "let's get the f__k out of here," and I agreed. I thought the guy was dead (Lankford 2).

(next section is lost)

Although this night was supposed to be an observation about the people of the streets, it turned out that we were walking on "Elm Street" and it was a "nightmare." I

will always remember one thing, next time I see bums and fags walking on the streets, I will never make fun of them or piss on them or anything like that, because they did not want to be bums or fags. It was society that forced them out of their jobs and they could not beat the system. Now when I think about that bum we beat up I can't understand how he managed to follow us the whole time, after being kicked and being down for so long. I think it was one of two things; he is either psychic or it was just plain magic (Miller 398).

Tabling for the moment, if possible, the idea of writerly intent, I'd like to look at what the essay actually does—which is a lot more than simply describe a horrific crime. It is not stuplime in the sense of repetition or constative exhaustion—its stuplimity lies in the way it uses mundane generic forms almost parodically to house its shocking content. One of the conference participants suggested comparing the essay side by side with legal definitions of hate speech, a strategy which Miller seems to champion. In some ways, it's a good one—it recognizes the text as a document with some pretty fierce rhetorical power. But the hate speech is actually only part of the story. In fact, the writer seems to be manipulating the conventions of essay assignments to make the clear hate speech he delivers more difficult for his instructor to refuse in the classroom context. Take, for example the following sentence: “My friends and I were now on our way to ...the gay capital of america...to make fun of the bums and kick them around..in San Fagcisco.” If we are to ignore, for one moment, the content and look at the diction, we can see that this bears the mark of a pretty rote travelogue—in fact, down to the nicknaming of the town. One can

imagine a much more benign article reading: “My friends and I were on our way to the sourdough capital of America, excited to try out the city’s famous clam chowder in a bread bowl—a perfect weekend in Frisco.” Then there is the “lesson learned” sentence (“I will never make fun of them or piss on them or anything like that because they did not want to be bums or fags”) of which Miller writes: “In miming the better understanding that is supposed to come from studying groups, the student’s essay concludes by disrupting all that has come before: did the beating actually take place, or has the writer simply fabricated it?” (398). Two sentences in the conclusion (“We were on ‘Elm Street’ and this was all a ‘nightmare’ and: “he is either psychic or it was just plain magic”) further call the veracity of the story into question, alluding to the genre of the dream sequence. Much as my student, Greg, was looking for an audience, this writer seems to be looking for a genre, but the very lack of genre leaves readers unable to read the essay without being stupefied, not knowing whether it’s a horror fiction, a criminal confession, or just a phoned-in, tongue-in-cheek essay meant to irritate the professor.

It is worth looking at the prompt for this essay, taken from the Bedford Guide for College Writers: “Station yourself in a nearby place where you can mingle with a group of people gathered for some reason or occasion. Observe the group’s behavior and in a short paper report on it. Then offer some insight.” The guide then goes on to provide some examples that previous writers had supposedly undertaken, such as a bar mitzvah, the people in an emergency room and a group of people looking at a Luna moth on a telephone pole. That group consisted of “a man who viewed [the moth] with alarm, a wondering toddler and an amateur entomologist” (qtd in

Miller 397). This prompt is interesting to me for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that I find the idea that a student just *happened* to wander across an entomologist, a curious toddler and a entomophobic all at the same time completely unbelievable. That is, inherent in this prompt seems to be an invitation to a little bit of fictionalizing on the writer's part.

But what I also find interesting is that “Queers, Bums and Magic” does, in fact, tell us a great *deal* about group behavior. “Unschooling in the arts of reading the textbook,” Miller writes, “this student failed to pick up on the implicit directions: report only on a group from which you are safely attached and on behavior unlikely to disturb others” (397). I’m actually not convinced that this student didn’t know he was breaking the unwritten rules of this prompt while strictly following the rules that are written. In fact, his essay calls attention to the hypocrisy of those unwritten rules quite well (“you want to hear about group behavior? I’ll tell you about group behavior”) but he does it slyly—in a way that Lankford finds, not only difficult to respond to, but also difficult to grade particularly poorly.

I am personally of the camp that believes that this essay response was quite possibly dangerous. I would’ve called psychiatric services¹⁹, as I feel unqualified to deal with this level of violence on my own. I also feel, however, that this writer *did*, for what it’s worth, respond to the assignment. In fact, he took the assignment pathologically to the letter, and was able to use that formula against Lankford, and even against the field as a whole. The “bad machines” he was

¹⁹ This isn’t meant to disparage Lankford, who I worked with for a number of years and respect a great deal. I’m not sure what the *best* way to handle this situation was, I just would not have wanted to make the decision about the veracity of the claims made in the paper on my own.

responding to were that of textbooks, of academia, of first year composition. And he calls the problems of these machines into question while offending, confusing, terrifying—and *following directions*. The essay also, if not answers, certainly asks some pertinent questions about “group behavior”: Maybe violent offenders are often motivated by fear—but that fear may be entirely of their own making. The homeless man, imagined or real, seems to have been no actual threat to the narrator, but he is perceived by the narrator and his friends as alien, other, monstrous. How often is this kind of unfounded but nonetheless affecting fear the motivation for hate crimes? “If we step back from *Queers, Bums and Magic*’ for a moment,” Miller writes, “and consider the fact that the mixture of rage, ignorance and confusion that produced this student essay are present in varying degrees on college campuses across the country, what is truly significant about this event is not that it occurred, but that it occurs so rarely”(398). Because it is so brutal and hateful (and at the same time so syntactically mundane) it’s hard to acknowledge we have something to learn from this text.

“The shocking and the boring,” writes Ngai, “prompt us to look for new strategies of affective engagement and to extend the circumstances under which engagement becomes possible” (262). And sometimes, as with the above essay, we’re forced to engage with a text that, at least in my case, we would much rather ignore. In the case of Quentin Pierce’s writing, or the writing of Shaughnessy’s and my students’, reading for the stuplime can allow us to see what *is* there instead of what isn’t. When we see noisy language, we ask ourselves what we began to ask in the last chapter: what does this noise disrupt? Where is this noise asking us to pay attention?

“Wherever we are,” writes John Cage, “what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of a truck at fifty miles per hour. Static between the stations. Rain. We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects, but as musical instruments” (Cage n.p.). One of the things that makes noises music is, according to Cage, the attention we pay to those noises. And so, when we take the time to look at Greg’s directive scattershot, we see that, in fact, there is a purpose to his incoherence and multiple audiences. Likewise, we see that Quentin’s string of curses, probably stemming from justifiable anger at the educational or capitalist systems, sounds not like nonsense, but like the angry music of the Sex Pistols, or like the angry aphorisms Nietzsche. Again, writing is not inherently inscrutable as much as we decide how much attention we want to pay to making sense of it. In the next chapter, we will look at what it actually *means* to “pay attention” and what some barriers to attentive engagement might be.

4.0 HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO WATCH A LITTLE PIECE OF PAPER? :

ATTENTION, BOREDOM AND LITERACY

The first time one of my students called a reading “boring” last year, I asked the whole class, as I often do, what makes a reading boring. I got many of the responses I usually get, with students describing being forced to read texts that they felt had nothing to do with them, or just wanting to do something else, but then I got a response I had never heard before. Ray, a young man at the university on a football scholarship who had grown up around a great deal of violence, said, “How am I supposed to watch a little piece of paper when I’m worried someone might be coming at me?”

This response has stuck with me for a number of reasons: first of all, of course, because of the violence implicit in it and also because of my own naïveté—though it’s obvious, it had never crossed my mind that it would be difficult if not impossible, to concentrate on a “little piece of paper” if one had to be hypervigilant of one’s surroundings. It also, though, clarified for me the idea of attention as a limited resource, and a resource whose distribution is not just a matter of personal preference or of neurological capacity, but whose distribution is learned, taught and demanded by forces which are often out of our control.

As I mention in my introduction, in a 1994 address called “The Economics of Attention,” rhetorician Richard Lanham likened contemporary literacy to a fighter cockpit. In his address, Lanham suggested that we were facing, “not a population explosion, but a document explosion,” which would lead to a new scarcity, the scarcity of “the human attention needed to make sense of information.”

Some of the forces that influence attention are, as we might assume is the case for Ray, the threat of violence and inescapable memory of trauma, others are social pressures and the demands of media—and there are countless other factors that influence how we learn to pay attention. Some people learned to read in silent libraries in which the librarian hushed even the slightest whisper and others learned to read in basements while listening for the sounds of gunfire on the streets. In adulthood, readers may be forced to re-learn how to pay attention if, for example, they are caring for a newborn baby or they’re using a new technology: a new reading device or a website heavy on hypertext, for example. That is, for a host of complex reasons, of which these examples just begin to scratch the surface, people learn how to pay attention quite differently depending on the environments they learned in and sometimes they have difficulty adjusting their attentional skills to fit the needs of unfamiliar situations.

The functioning of attention is frequently either overlooked or misunderstood in the humanities, even in studies of literacy, where attention has often played a pivotal role. In his book also titled *The Economics of Attention*, Lanham argues that printed text itself “wants” deep attention. He writes:

Print wants us to concentrate on the content, to enhance and protect conceptual thought. It does this by filtering out all the signals that might interfere with such thinking. By nature a silent medium and, for people of my generation at least, best read in a silent environment, print filters out any auditory signal. It also filters out color, print is only black on white. By choosing a single font and a single size, it filters out visual distraction as well. Typographical design aims not to be seen, or more accurately, since true invisibility is hard to read, to seem to not to be seen, not to be noticed. We don't notice the verbal surface at all, and plunge without typographical self-consciousness right into the meaning. Print, that is, constructs, a particular economy of attention, an economy of sensory denial" (46).

Lanham's argument about the austerity of the printed text is, in some ways an interesting one (as a typophile, I would certainly argue with him about the unnoticability of font, but I do find it fascinating to consider the things we are *not supposed to* pay attention to in a book.) However, the argument is debatable. (The silent, limited-font, single-color, non-illuminated, linear codex is a relatively new, and potentially short-lived blip on the historical screen of literacy. This "economy of sensory denial" is not a *feature* of text itself, so much as a *convention* of *reading* text that came into play well post-Gutenberg and is potentially dwindling with the advent of the internet. As many historians of literacy will attest, books were read out loud in groups until silent reading was "invented" in the ninth century, and well into the eighteenth century, books printed on the printing press, including the Gutenberg Bible, were printed in

multiple colors, illuminated and often illustrated with woodblock prints (“Gutenberg’s Legacy”). All of this to say: up until the mid 1700s, books commonly contained “noise” within their very pages. Lanham generalizes from his own experience without acknowledging the manifold experiences of the long history of actual readers and the varied practices, both personal and cultural, of reading. In his book *Chasing Literacy: Reading and Writing in an Age of Acceleration*, Daniel Keller warns against making claims about the types of attention that print “demands,” writing, “I understand the use of this shorthand, but if we are to better study attention and reading we would benefit from considering the characteristics included in the heuristic—task, tactic, technology and training—and examining how they apply with different people in different contexts, rather than assuming that the text is the only determiner of how something is read” (120). I would also add to this that the attention texts “demand” is influenced by the attention structures of the external environment and culture in which the text is being read. In short, while I would add even more to his formula (or perhaps argue that attentional needs cannot be pared down to a formula at all,) I agree with Keller that figuring out how much attention is needed for one particular text is far too complicated to attribute only to the text itself.

The calm quiet reading room or the “plunge right into meaning” have never been as easily accessible to everyone as Lanham makes them seem. Quiet, both physical and mental, are luxuries. And though we are certainly living in an age of increased distraction, especially insofar as reading is concerned, a phenomenon that I will discuss later in this chapter, educational pundits have long complained about unfocused and incompetent youth. In 1975, *Newsweek*

famously published an article entitled “Why Johnny Can’t Write,” which blamed, among other things, the diversion of television for the supposedly declining writing ability of American college students. That article takes its name from the 1955 book *Why Johnny Can’t Read*, bemoaning—you guessed it—the supposed failure of *that* generation’s ability to read²⁰. As far back as the Victorian Era, older generations were bemoaning the younger generation’s distraction from their studies with their handheld devices—in this case, not smart phones, but kaleidoscopes. UK paper, *The Literary Panorama*, published an op-ed bemoaning the kaleidoscope in 1818:

“We are in Despair! [Not because of politics; that all will pass. We see] ourselves out done — thrown into the shade, the background, by a newly found out old invention, to see all the world, instead of studying the Telescope, the Microscope, or the Periscope—all the world intent on nothing but—the Kaleidoscope. Surely, this is too bad! Every boy in the street studies his Kaleidoscope, though he bumps his head against a wall” (*Literary Panorama* 502).

N. Katherine Hayles tackles what she sees as the new topic of young people’s short attention spans in her essay “Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes” despite this long history. In this essay, she coins the term “deep attention,” the cognitive mode she claims is “characterized by concentrating on a single object for long periods (the example she chooses is a novel by Dickens), ignoring outside stimuli while so engaged, preferring

²⁰ Flesch’s entire theory is too much to get into here, but he was the first to promote a “straight-talk” philosophy of phonetic reading instruction, which valued clarity. He was also one of the creators of the Flesh-Kinkaide readability scale and a famous skeptic of dyslexia diagnoses.

a single information stream, and having a high tolerance for long focus times” (Hayles 187). She contrasts this to the mode she argues contemporary college students prefer—that is, “hyper attention, which she defines as: “characterized by switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom,”²¹ (187). She claims that “hyper attention” would have been an evolutionarily helpful attention structure, in that it would’ve helped humans be aware of predators, though this is conjecture. She also argues that hyper attention is enjoying a resurgence among college students, due to their constant exposure to technology, especially mobile phones, which cause constant distraction. She frames this move toward hyper attention as a crisis for concentrating on text.

In fact, when Hayles interviewed educators about attention, many of them reported that students no longer wanted to pay attention to long texts or tasks and the professors therefore assigned short stories as opposed to novels, but when she interviewed the students themselves, “there was a more or less even split between those who identified with deep attention and those who preferred hyper attention” (a statement which indicates only preference, and not whether or not students were willing or able to move *between* modes of attention.) It is perhaps even more interesting to note that, according to Hayles, all of the students “agreed that their younger siblings were completely into hyper attention” (189). This *could* indicate a generational move

²¹ Though boredom is never defined

toward hyper attention but it could just as likely indicate a generational *perception* that the attention spans of those younger than us are too short, just as Cold War Era parents felt the attention spans of television-watching children were too short and Victorians felt kaleidoscope-obsessed children had too-short attention spans. “Hyper attention” might be a step on Raymond Williams’ “nostalgia escalator,” in which we imagine a past world, always out of reach, that was not as tainted as the present.

In fact, “hyper attention” and “deep attention” are terms that Hayles herself coined and that are used, either by her, or in reference to her article, but have no currency elsewhere. We may have some sense of what she means when she refers to the two types of attention, having experienced the all-encompassing engagement of being enthralled by a book we love or the distraction of constantly checking our cell phones while sitting through department meetings ourselves. These two situations certainly feel different, but the attentional processes at play in those situations are not processes that happen to different types of brains. Both processes (along with a range of processes in between) happen to *all* relatively healthy brains. Hayles goes so far as to argue that the brains of hyper-attentive college students (and in the case of her article, those students take the role of “them”) are vastly different than that of older generations, those who favor deep attention (who take the role of “us,” presumably professors.) Empirical studies of attention and reading show no such thing. What we seem to be seeing here is something of an unprovable historical commonplace: “kids these days have shorter attention spans than did the

previous generation”.²² Therefore, Hayles’ closing entreaty: “How can the considerable benefits of deep attention be cultivated in a generation of students who prefer a high level of stimulation and have a low threshold for boredom? [...] With the trend toward hyper attention already evident in colleges and universities, these are becoming urgent concerns” (195) seems slightly unfounded. According to Keller, “Hayles’ distinction between ‘hyper’ and ‘deep’ attention can be useful, especially if perceived as a matter of degree and not a binary state” (119). He argues that we all are always fluctuating between the two modes when we read and that instruction in contemporary literacy should not be on hyper *or* deep attention, but rather on when to dig deeply and when to skim the surface.

In other words, the relationship between attention and literacy is complicated; we should not repeat commonplace perceptions about how attention works, the kinds of attention contemporary students are adept at or not adept at, or the types of attention “print wants” without researching whether or not these claims are true. Furthermore, I don’t think we’re going to come up with any kind of one-size fits all answer to what the attention signature of the contemporary college student (or any group of people, for that matter) is. College students are simply too diverse a group of human beings. Because attention is learned and is mutable, literacy learners all have exposure to different attention structures and have different attentional needs, just as different texts and composing tasks are amenable to different attentional skills.

²² There is rigorous debate about whether the brains of those with ADHD are different than the brains of those without, but even that is unclear—at least according to some researchers.

In the following sections, I will examine research on attention and distraction, looking at how that research relates to literacy. I argue that our brains are not getting tragically rewired by technology but that in some cases we haven't fully learned the attentional practices we need to best use these technologies toward literacy. I argue that trauma, too, has a huge impact on attention in the classroom and the functioning of trauma should be taken into consideration when designing literacy curricula.

4.1 ATTENTION AND (DIGITAL) LITERACY

Though it may not have the slippery multiplicity of the boredoms, “attention” is also difficult to define. Different disciplines have proposed an array of definitions that bear family resemblances, but the details of attention are difficult to pin down. Scientists, like humanists, rely on metaphors to describe the indescribable—and the functioning of the brain’s relationship to attention seems to be largely described by the technology of the era in which (or the era just before which) the scientist is writing. These metaphors are so familiar to the audience that they are almost unnoticeable as metaphors (“of course the brain is like a computer/ a freight train/ a bottleneck”) but it is important to understand that they only give us a partial understanding of attention. That is: just as we begin to understand attention as an overloaded hard drive, for example, a new metaphor (attention as crowd sourcing, or attention as “the cloud,” perhaps) will likely take over our current understanding. While the metaphors used to describe attention processes change,

one thing seems to stay the same: the definitions never make clear who or what controls attention. The person paying (or not paying) attention is not fully in control; nor is the object of attention in control. In other words, attention is an agentless phenomenon, or at least a phenomenon for which the agent is unclear. Take the following 2015 definition from “The Attentive Brain: Insights from Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience” by Dima Amso and Gaia Scerif which defines attention as: “a process or computation that is applied to the competing environmental information, the result of which is to bias selection and action to one option while simultaneously filtering interference from the remaining alternatives” (606). Note the passive construction of their sentence—we don’t know who or what is applying the “process or computation” or what that “process or computation” might be or who or what is “biasing selection” or “filtering interference.” Is the attentive animal making decisions? How are environmental factors affecting the processes? The answers to these questions vary from one attention-situation to the next, sometimes just milliseconds apart (and neuroscientists are still actively trying to figure out the mechanisms at play in a variety of attentional processes.) It’s important to note that this definition is similar to William James’ 1890 locomotive definition of attention: “the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought” (James 403-4) in that we see the selection of an object of attention from a range of possible objects, though Amso and Scerif’s definition brings in some important new ideas. Firstly, we see attention as a process or computation, as opposed to something that just sort of “happens” in James’ definition. Also, in

the contemporary definition, attention “biases selection and *action*” while in James’ definition, attention biases only selection.

Another definition, from *The Principles of Cognitive Neuroscience*, defines attention as: “The marshalling of cognitive processing resources on a particular aspect of the external or internal environment, or on internal processes such as thoughts or memories” (222). In “marshalling,” we see a particularly authoritarian word, though again agentless. And this definition articulates something that the previous definitions do not bring to the fore, that is: the brain must not only choose its object(s) of focus from entities in the environment, but from the brain itself: from thought and *memory*. Memory is a complicated process which both influences and is influenced by attention, and which we will discuss more in-depth later in this chapter.

The etymology of the word “attend” is “to stretch to” (“attend”) and I find this a particularly useful and graceful definition of attention—a stretching to. Though much broader than the definitions above, this shows the movement and the yearning of attention, and also the confusion about who or what is doing the stretching and who or what are being stretched. It also carries within it the implicit assumption that one can only stretch in so many directions at once (that is, that one must “bias selection and action”²³). As we can see from all the definitions, attention is an intricate and even sometimes convoluted “computation,” but it is an extremely important one for functioning in society and especially for learning. In the words of Amso and

²³ It seems to be up for debate whether we can “pay attention” to only one thing or to more than one thing. In some ways this is a question of semantics, how we define “pay attention” and how we define “one.” Some people define one thing as a group of things. We also may pay attention to one thing after another in rapid succession.

Scerif: “attention processes determine what information is selected for subsequent perception, action, learning and memory, imposing a crucial bottleneck” (606). That is, if attention is functioning “properly,” it *slows perception down*, helping us make sense of cluttered worlds and cluttered brains.

Of course, attention does not always function “properly”, or rather—sometimes the way attention functions does not match the way instructors (or cognitive scientists) desire it to function. Ray’s attention was functioning just fine to protect himself in the neighborhood in which he grew up, but was not functioning in the way *I* wanted it to—that is to say: to focus on reading. Furthermore, two individuals, even individuals who appear similar to outside observers, may have completely different responses to attention-situations. This does not mean that one reader should be pathologized and another privileged. As Rodney Jones points out in *Understanding Digital Literacies: A Practical Introduction*:

Many of the cognitive and social problems we encounter around the issue of attention [...] arise because the attention structures being used don’t fit the circumstances of the task at hand, or because the attention structures people bring to the situation, those made possible by the media available, and those associated with the social relationships and circumstances of the situation are somehow ‘out of sync’” (89).

Perhaps, as Hayles and others argue, generational trends may be a factor in some attention structures, but our understanding of generational attentional trends are far too broad and based on conjecture to simplify attention structure simply by age or exposure to

technologies. It will be useful to look at some of the ways in which attention does function in literacy so that we can understand how changing relationships to attention affect teaching and learning.

Technology influences the ways readers and writers pay attention, but how this happens is complex. Tapping around on smart phones and iPads does not simply “rewire” the brains of Millennials and make them more surface (and therefore poorer) readers, as Hayles seems to intimate. Much has been made in pop neuroscience (and in the humanities) of the idea of “neuroplasticity,” described popularly as the “brain’s ability to change itself in response to things that happen in our environment” (Storr) and more technically as “the ability of the brain to change its functional organization and neural representations (e.g. motor and sensory maps) as a result of damage or experience and in response to altered peripheral conditions or behavioral demands” (Binder et. al 3169). As you can see, the technical definition is more complex than the informal definition and also requires specific circumstances: “altered peripheral conditions” (think of Ray’s attentiveness to the activity in his peripheral vision) and “behavioral demands,” as opposed to “*things* that happen in our environment” to actually work. Of course, pop science articles about “how to rewire your brain!” can’t get into the detail of scientific papers, but somewhere along the line, “neuroplasticity” has become simplified to near-meaninglessness in pop culture. And while Hayles has a firm background in the sciences, her claims about contemporary college students favoring hyper attention because of their reliance on cell phones

seems too focused on media affordances and too little focused on the complex cultural and personal experiences that contribute to learning and using attention structures.

Bestselling books and cover articles about the brain, and to some extent the pedagogies that affiliate with them tend to understand plasticity as the idea that if we use the brain enough in one way (aka: to write text messages or check social media), our brains will be re-formed into new brains that are physically different than our old brains, which used to be “wired” to write long, lovely sentences, and read long, lovely books and are now only wired to pay short-term attention to Twitter feeds. We can see this sentiment in Hayles, who writes: “Children growing up in media-rich environments literally have brains wired differently from those of people who did not come to maturity under that condition” (190) and Nicholas Carr’s oft-cited and oft-debated “Is Google Making us Stupid?” in which Carr writes, “Over the past few years I’ve had an uncomfortable sense that someone, or something, has been tinkering with my brain, remapping the neural circuitry, reprogramming the memory” (spoiler: that someone or something is the Internet) (Carr 1). He goes on:

My mind isn’t going—so far as I can tell—but it’s changing. I’m not thinking the way I used to think. I can feel it most strongly when I’m reading. Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I’d spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That’s rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as

if I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle. (Carr)²⁴

A few paragraphs down, Carr brings up the idea of neuroplasticity, insinuating that it is the Internet reshaping his brain, and in turn, all modern brains (a logical stretch,) though, as I mention earlier, like many other writers bemoaning the same sense of loss of attention in either themselves or today's youth, he cannot make a solid argument that the "smart phone brain" is significantly organically different than, say, the "rotary phone brain" because no such thing has ever been proven. It is *likely* that there is some physical difference between the brain of someone who tweets 24/7 and someone who doesn't, though to my knowledge, no brain imaging studies of Twitter junkies have ever been done—but even if they had, and even if those studies showed different neural connections in Twitter users than in non-Twitter-users, it wouldn't tell us a whole lot. The brain creates new neural connections with frequent use—so no two brains are alike, and no one brain stays the same throughout a lifetime or even throughout a year. The neural connections in the brains of string musicians, for example, show differences from non-musicians' brains, because of constant use of the musicians' hands for playing, and the brains of London cab drivers show differences from the brains of London bus drivers because cab drivers need to memorize more streets (Storr). These kinds of changes are usually not unidirectional; the

²⁴ This article was originally published as a cover story in the Atlantic Monthly in 2008 and sparked a debate which is, to some extent, still ongoing, amongst neuroscientists, technology bloggers and literacy scholars about how the Internet affects the brain and whether "the book is the apex of human culture"

connections can be unmade and remade (later in this chapter, I will discuss some more dire circumstances in which the brain has a more difficult time “fixing” connections.) As of now, the idea that constant interaction with technology is somehow irrevocably reshaping our brains into machines we don’t recognize seems to be, not reality, but a metaphor for the sense that something is happening to our minds and the minds of the youth that is out of our control²⁵. What *does* seem to be happening is that the requirements of attention and its counterpart, memory, are changing with the rapid onset of new technologies, and we might not yet have fully learned the attention structures necessary to work with those technologies. Or, more accurately, some people, often because of socially stratified conditions, are learning the attention structures necessary for certain school-based and work-based literacies while others are not.

A neuroscientific idea that is often overlooked in discussions of the way technology affects literacy is the idea of “working memory,” which is, according to Amso and Scerif, “A cognitive operation that involves manipulating the contents of short-term memory to direct goal-relevant action” (606). In other words, working memory is the part of our brain that figures out what to *do* with our short-term memory. According to researchers at the Stockholm Brain Institute, the brain can only hold three or four items in the working memory at once. While this number is certainly up for debate (and what are “items?” Memories? Visual cues? Thoughts?)

²⁵ As Keller points out, this dichotomy is dangerous: “When I come across fears of brains being ‘wired differently’ in numerous accounts, I get the sense of two possible wiring patterns, the ‘normal’ book-based wiring and the ‘different’ digital-based wiring. In this sense, the effects of technology also sound deterministic: increased media exposure (and that alone) will rewire brains differently from the ‘normal’ wiring, which assumes all media exposure besides books will wire the brain in a similar direction/ pattern. Thus, we teachers will have one kind of brain, and students will have another kind of brain” (Keller 123).

there is consensus that the amount of room in the working memory is limited. One of the Stockholm researchers, Erik Fransén, describes the problem thus:

When you are on Facebook, you are making it harder to keep the things that are ‘online’ in your brain that you need. In fact, when you try to process sensory information like speech or video, you are going to need partly the same system of working memory, so you are reducing your own working memory capacity. And when you try to store many things in your working memory, you get less good at processing information (Callahan).

This phenomenon may partially account for the feeling of loss of control that Carr complains of while reading. Our computers and phones ping, letting us know when someone has sent us a message, or when there is key news. And our brains themselves ping, reminding us, not only of the last book we read, but also that our loved ones may be texting us or that there may be something interesting on the news or on Facebook. To continue the cognitive scientists’ computer metaphor: the more we overload our short-term memories, the “less good” we become at processing information. Add to this the issue of the “reward system,” which increases the levels of dopamine, which *very* simply put, is the chemical that releases a pleasure sensation in our systems when we are *seeking* rewards (for example, when we are checking our email.) Dopamine levels are highest when the rewards are unpredictable—that is, if I know I will always get an email from a love interest every time I check my phone, my dopamine is actually lower than if the frequency with which I get love letters is sporadic. The unpredictability *raises* my dopamine levels and therefore my excitement at checking my phone. With systems like Facebook, Twitter,

Snapchat, Instagram, and so on, which frequently refresh, therefore constantly providing potential for new reward or disappointment, there is a constant supply of potential unpredictable reward input and this, frankly, is a difficult distraction to combat, especially if one is reading or writing on the same machine that provides those rewards. These distractions tax attention directly and also tax working memory. As Richard Miller writes: “The most pressing issue is learning how to read when distractions of every variety are not only imminently present in the screen’s keyboard but also manifest on screen, atop the text one is reading” (“On Digital Reading” 154).

Long-term memory, too, is a key factor in attention processes; once something catches your attention, you have to decide what to do with it, and if you have no prior experience to “attach” the attention-object to, it is likely it will not stay in your attention for long. In terms of reading, for example, this means that, when faced with an unfamiliar text, the reader is more likely to pay attention to that text only if he or she can “reach in” to his or her memory for a subject or text to relate the new text to. In this case, the relationship between working memory and attention is the process of attaching content to context. This is what reading theorists call “schema theory²⁶,” in which “comprehending a text is an interactive process between the reader’s background knowledge and the text” (An 130). Technologies like the cell phone, the Internet and, yes, Google, externalize memory. Information that we used to memorize is now stored

²⁶ When it came about, in the 1980s, the metaphor most commonly used with schema theory was that of a filing cabinet—that is, as one learned new information, one would reorganize one’s “mental filing cabinet” around the new knowledge.

extrasomatically, in our handheld devices or in the “cloud”, which allows us to store *more* information, but also keeps that information out of the reach of our long-term and working memories and could potentially affect how much schema we have for new information to stick to, or at least affect the contents of that schema. But perhaps we needn’t worry too soon. Socrates (through Plato,) worried about externalizing memory with an early technology: writing. He warned Phaedrus:

It will introduce forgetfulness into the soul of those who learn it: they will not use their memory because they will put their trust in writing, which is external and depends on signs that belong to others, instead of completely on their own [...] You provide your students with the appearance of wisdom, not with its reality [...] And they will be difficult to get along with, since they will merely appear to be wise instead of really being so (Plato 79-80).

Whether there is truth to Socrates’ claim, we cannot know for certain, since we don’t know what life would have been like without the printed word, but it does seem safe to say that whatever was lost in memory power, there was a great deal gained when readers obtained access to more information through books. In fact, according to motivation theorist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the externalization of memory is the definition of literacy itself. In his essay “Literacy and Intrinsic Motivation,” he writes: “The ability to code and to decode information preserved in such extrasomatic memory systems is what we call literacy” (120). But while the challenge of how to manage a glut of information (and misinformation) is not new, the influx of

information does present itself on a larger scale than ever before and shows no signs of slowing. Universities now teach courses in “Dealing with Data,” which try to teach students how to weed through the massive amount of information (perhaps pertinent, perhaps not) available on the Internet that constantly challenges their attention. One need not have Ray’s struggle with the hypervigilance of trauma to struggle with their attention being drawn in multiple directions, not knowing which environmental cues might be relevant, especially when placed in a new environment. This is the “fighter cockpit” that Lanham described in 1994.

Additionally, there are some features unique to digital reading and writing that present us with new attentional challenges, specifically that of the decision making found in reading hypertext. The hypertext article, or any article found online, presents readers with a number of options on the screen that they can click on at any moment to take them to another, potentially more interesting screen. This is more than just a distraction; this changes the very nature of the narrative. As reading theorists Afflerbach and Cho point out, reading hypertext is “realizing and constructing potential texts to read” (217). That is, a decision must be made at every link (and I would add that decisions are also made at every pop-up window, every footnote and every ad in the margin—*will I go there or will I stay here?*) A study by DeStefano and LeFevre found that readers were more easily able to comprehend hypertexts with fewer links and that “reading is impaired as decision-making demands increase”(1622). This is, ostensibly, because “with the flexible sequencing of hypertext, related sentences are likely to be read further apart in time than in linear texts and individuals who are poor at keeping verbal representations active in memory

may be particularly disadvantaged” (1625). This goes hand in hand with DeStefano and LeFevre’s findings that students with higher working memory spans did better at reading hypertext than did those with low working memory spans. However, I’m not convinced that a working-memory span is an inherent trait any more than an attention span is. In other words, as I’ve outlined above, social and cultural factors such as demands on working memory and mismatched attention structures affect one’s working memory span a great deal.

4.2 DEMANDING ATTENTION

How often do teachers tell students from kindergarten to college to “pay attention?” I did it to my class just the other day—and would you like to guess how well it worked? I’ll give you a hint: there’s a reason I’m doing this research. My students, for whatever reason, seem to substantially louder when I give them a handout and ask one person to read it out loud and everyone else to read along silently. I don’t know why that is. It’s as though if one person is reading, the work is being done and the rest can just go about their daily business as though there’s not a class going on. One way or another, my entreaty did not work at all. As I’ve said before, “pay attention” is a useless command because students often don’t want to or don’t know how to pay attention, especially if the attention structures they have learned are far different from the attention

structures necessary for the situation they are in, as I assume is the case with my students and handouts. And it is an especially useless command because attention is simply not obedient.

So how does one deal with the distraction of the disjointed and unpredictable narrative of the hypertext? How can one deal with the demands of technology considering the limited space of working memory? How does one disrupt a dopamine loop once inside it? In short: what are the pedagogical implications for literacy and attention in the digital age?

It turns out, according to reading theorist Julie Coiro, that gamers are often better online readers than their non-gaming counterparts (Konnikova). In other words, the attention structures needed to play video games come in handy when reading online. In fact, Coiro found that online experience was more important to being able to comprehend online texts than domain knowledge of the subject of that text, claiming “prior knowledge of the topic appeared to take a back seat to knowledge of how to navigate and negotiate multiple online texts when reading for information on the internet” (Coiro 375). The skills she names as helpful for online reading are “generating digital queries, applying prior knowledge of search engines and websites, and monitoring one’s reading pathways and speed in relation to one’s online reading purposes” (Coiro 357-58) all of which are attention structures that can be taught. Patricia Greenfield, a psychologist at UCLA, found that the negative effects of reading online were significantly reduced if readers took notes on paper (Konnikova) and there are a number of new online annotation programs that students can use that also increase recall of text, as well as a sense of community among readers. Psychologists Ackerman and Goldsmith found that, when studying

groups of paper-text and screen-text readers: “Under fixed study time, test performance did not differ between the two media, but when study time was self-regulated, worse performance was observed on screen than on paper” (Ackerman and Goldsmith 18). In other words, people seem to read better digitally if a deadline is imposed on them. While we don’t want to put students in the position in which they constantly have to turn to instructors for reading deadlines, we can work with them to impose their own deadlines—a tool they can continue to use beyond the classroom.

Keller’s book, *Chasing Literacy: Reading and Writing in an Age of Acceleration*, mentioned throughout this chapter, has many more extremely helpful tactics for teaching online reading. However, he does seem to assume that we can command attention to do as we like. He writes: “readers need to be . . . versatile, able to use a repertoire of reading strategies that vary in speed and depth. Slow, fast, shallow and deep readings—and all of the degrees in between—are shaped by choices of attention” (101). But how often is paying attention a choice? Or, put differently: how often do we choose to be distracted? How do we know, when weeding through the internet, what to search for and where to focus? In the case studies Keller uses, the young people are reading and researching subjects of interest to them (David, an online gamer playing one game while reading message boards for another; Tim, another online gamer investigating graphic design tactics for developing characters for *World of Warcraft*; and Diana a young woman searching different versions of the same news story across various sources to get a nuanced view) for which they have an existing schema. They know the discourse and the jargon,

and can therefore notice new or out-of-place information. There are affective and cultural factors that are being overlooked. Keller says that “The participants attended to multiple streams of information, shifting screens and texts with a sense of purpose and a dexterous handling of tasks. They were not getting lost in chains of hyperlinks, clicking away from one idea to a new, unrelated one” (119). and that is true in the examples he uses, because those readers care about the subject matter, but it is certainly possible if one is less engaged or simply does not understand the parameters of a subject matter, to veer wildly off-course when following hyperlinks. The readers’ attention stay focused here because they are already affectively engaged.

So what do we do about the fact that attention isn’t obedient? We can’t simply demand obedient attention more fervently, because that just doesn’t work. We can, as early reading theory suggests, build on students’ existing schema, though I suggest building not just on knowledge but on interest and affective engagement. Interest is what keeps David, Tim and Diana scrolling through pertinent hyperlinks without getting sidetracked by text messages and music videos. Of course, there is no one topic of interest to an entire composition class, which is why I usually allow some student choice in topics and readings. This way, I can teach both online and library research methods while allowing students to build on their own schemas of interest.

Another, perhaps surprising, place to look for opportunities for engagement is boredom. One of the problems with distraction is that it can be quite difficult to notice when we’re distracted—that’s the nature of the beast. But we almost always notice when we’re bored. In this

way, boredom can be extremely useful information about when attention structures don't quite fit the situation at hand.

“When will a person label his or her state boredom? Difficulty in concentration seems central to the experience, but if one is having trouble paying attention to a task, the feeling may be labeled boredom, sleepiness, dislike for the task, or distraction by other factors,” writes C. D. Fisherl in her seminal 1993 article “Boredom at Work: A Neglected Concept.” Fisherl continues: “It seems that individuals look to the environment for help in determining how they feel and why they feel that way, suggesting that boredom can be manipulated at least partly by the cues or alternative explanations supplied by that environment” (Fisherl). These distractions can vary widely, which is why in some circumstances it could prove helpful for struggling readers and writers to pay attention to experiences of boredom—and the environments in which they happen--as they arise.

In one example, researchers London and Monell provided workers, all of whom worked a twenty-minute block, with clocks that either ran ten minutes fast, or ten minutes slow and found that “those whose clocks had advanced ten minutes said the task was more boring than those whose clocks had advanced thirty minutes during the actual twenty minute work period” (Fisherl). Boredom didn't arise from the task itself, or from the actual amount of time it took to accomplish the task, but from the perceived amount of time it took to accomplish the task. In other words, boredom does not only induce a sense that time is dragging, but creating a sense that time is dragging actually induces boredom.

Similarly, researchers Damrad-Frye and Laird conducted a study that seemed to indicate that subtle distractions cause feelings of boredom, while explicit distractions do not. In this study (which I mentioned to my students when I tried to get them to give up their cell phones in Chapter Two,) researchers asked subjects to listen to a recording that had been previously classified by a focus group as “moderately interesting.” Some subject groups were in a room with a television playing loudly in the next room, others with a television playing at a barely perceptible volume in the next room, and still others with no television playing at all. Participants were then asked to rate their experience of interest or boredom in the original recording. Those who had been exposed to the television at a barely perceptible volume reported considerably more boredom with the original recording than either those who had been exposed to the television at loud volume or those who had not been exposed to the sounds of the television at all, indicating that when subjects could identify the source of their distraction, they were less bored than when they could not identify that source. (Damrad-Frye and Laird). This suggests, although no studies that I know of have been done on the topic, that the constant distraction of the cell phone (or the threat of distraction) may increase feelings of boredom.

The boredom of the misattribution of distraction onto the environment or task strikes me as particularly important to the metacognitive self-study of attention, especially as it relates to literacy because, if a reader is bored, they can take stock of their surroundings—perhaps the way they are reading—if they’re distracted by a number of hyperlinks, a sound in the next room, their telephone, etc... and potentially take steps to deal with those distractions. This isn’t to say that a

reader might not actually be disinterested in a text, but boredom with a text doesn't *always* arise from the text itself, and when it doesn't, it would be helpful for the reader (or writer) to know the origin of the boredom.

In other words, boredom is not the opposite of engagement, but distraction is. Used wisely, boredom can *alert* us to our struggle between distraction and engagement. Why is this important? Well, in pure distraction, we don't notice attention is being derailed until we're on another track on our way to another town, but with boredom, we *feel* (and notice) the pull of multiple directions. Therefore, we can become metacognitively aware of situations that cause distraction. Again, it's unlikely that we'll be able to make our attention immediately obedient in these situations, that we'll be able to snap to focus when we know we are affected by the clock or a noise in the next room or by waiting for an important text. But we may be able, once we know our personal distractions, to avoid clocks and phones while we read and write, to listen to music or "white" noise, to *create environments that are conducive to paying attention*. Demanding attention won't work, but inviting it may.

4.3 TRAUMA AND LITERACY

I began this chapter talking about a student, Ray, with a problem more dire than an "addiction" to Google. Ray was so affected by past violence that he could not concentrate on reading because he needed to keep his attention focused on threats in his periphery. This brings me to the

discussion of trauma, which gets little mention in literacy scholarship but can have a great deal of impact on attention and learning.

Before I get too deeply into this section, I would like to make the rather unorthodox move of situating myself and my own experience within the discussion of trauma. As I mention in the introduction to this dissertation, I came to the study of boredom, attention and literacy—and to the study of writing pedagogy itself—because of my personal experiences with trauma. At about the age of seventeen, when I was first in college, I was diagnosed with what is now called a “complex trauma disorder,”²⁷ which is basically a form of posttraumatic stress disorder brought about by ongoing violence or abuse in early childhood. Complex trauma is particularly difficult for issues of attention because it causes not only hypervigilance, hyperarousal, dissociation and sometimes hypoarousal, but also severe and ongoing difficulty constructing linear narratives, the reasons for which I will go into shortly. I think it’s important to mention my own experience here because, while I have long since learned how to deal with the effects of my trauma and even, in some cases, to use them to my advantage, I very much see myself as *inside* this discussion, both as professor and student. As Elizabeth Dutro points out in “The Writing Wounded: Trauma, Testimony and Critical Witness in Literacy Classrooms,” the discussion of trauma can easily become one in which the researcher discusses the student as “other.”

The class-privileged assumptions that ascribe otherness to students and families living in poverty operate from an arm's length perspective, employing “those people” language

²⁷ Also sometimes called “Developmental Trauma Disorder”

both literally and figuratively. Such language [...] constructs a distinction of value among human beings creating an "us" and "them" that casts the middle class as the subjects and the poor as objects, thus perpetuating assumptions of deficiency in high-poverty families and communities (208).

For that reason, I feel it's important to point out that, while I did grow up in an upper-middle class home, I was once the aggravated student in the back of the room who stormed out (and eventually dropped out,) who refused certain assignments, and who, when I finally returned to college six years later, spent the first year and a half hunting for classes in which I didn't have to write essays (more on this later.) But I was also the student who found respite in language—first in storytelling, and much later, and much to my surprise, in expository writing. Because of this, I have long been perplexed, heartbroken, confused and fascinated by the ways in which trauma affects learning. I've also always been surprised by how, in my case and for many others, distraction and boredom are not forms of apathy, but instead highly agitating states that seem to beget a frantic avalanche of even more distraction and boredom. I have also always been intrigued by the fact that learning how to write adeptly helped me organize what was a quite disorganized brain—a transformation that led me to become a writing instructor.

Some readers may say that it is not the job of the writing professor to cure or even diagnose the traumatized student. They are right. But neither is it the job of the writing professor to ignore the prevalence of trauma in the classroom, especially since issues of violence, sexual assault, racism and poverty, all of which cause responses somewhere on the trauma spectrum,

disproportionately affect women, people of color, and the poor. This is an issue that is prevalent in classes labeled “Basic Skills,” but that nonetheless affects students at all levels. That is, trauma is not only an issue of the random unfortunate student here and there to whom some horrible event (or, more likely, series of events) has occurred, but is a widespread issue inflected by gender, class and race. If we see education as a means toward democratization as opposed to oppression, then I argue that we must take trauma and its effects on attention and learning into account when we develop assignments and when we assess writing and classroom behavior. Because trauma manifests in some highly counterintuitive ways (sometimes a traumatized student, for example, hides under what Benjamin describes as “the grey cloak of boredom²⁸”) it is important to look at it more closely, especially as it may manifest in attention and language.

According to Jaycox et al, “A trauma is defined in the psychiatric literature as a sudden, life threatening event, in which an individual feels horrified, terrified, or helpless and includes such events as personal experience or witnessing of violent assaults” (1). Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) occurs when the symptoms of the natural response to trauma do not lessen over time, but instead persist or even grow. In this chapter, I will look at the research on PTSD and complex trauma disorder as examples of the far reaches of the effects of trauma with the understanding that there is a spectrum of trauma and that not all students who suffer some of these effects would have a full-blown PTSD or complex trauma diagnosis. In fact, according to

²⁸ “Boredom is a warm gray fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colorful of silks. In this fabric we wrap ourselves then we dream [...] But the sleeper looks bored and gray within his sheath.” (Benjamin 105-6, D2a,1)

Katoaoka et al. in their study “Violence Exposure and PTSD: The Role of English Language Fluency in Latino Youth,” “trauma can have devastating effect, including among children who do not exhibit symptoms sufficient to merit diagnosis of a clinically-significant trauma-related disorder” (334). It is also important to understand that the purpose of this investigation is absolutely not to diagnose trauma, which is far out of the expertise of myself or most other writing professors. Indeed, it is dangerous for an instructor to do anything by way of psychological assessment beyond making resources for psychological services known to students. If a student is deep in the throes of trauma, either from a recent occurrence or from active PTSD symptoms, they may have a difficult time functioning in the classroom without outside psychiatric or psychological help. What this investigation seeks to do is to look at some of the ways in which trauma functions in attention, even long after many critical symptoms are controlled, and ways in which instructors of writing can structure classes that work with, and not against the functioning of trauma.

The effects of trauma, especially on literacy, have been studied very little at the postsecondary level. There has been research on the affects of trauma on the K-12 population (though again, literacy usually only gets a passing mention—and the mention is that complex trauma is correlated with low reading levels,) specifically in low socioeconomic urban areas, and as you may suspect, the effects are grave. So grave, in fact, that a group of students, educators, social workers and researchers in the city of Compton sued the city in 2015, claiming that:

Decades of research have proven that children who grow up in high-poverty neighborhoods characterized by minimal investment in schools, quality housing, after-school programs, parks, and other community resources are disproportionately likely to be exposed to trauma and complex trauma. Trauma stems from such causes as exposure to violence and loss, family disruptions related to deportation, incarceration and/or the foster system, systemic racism and discrimination, and the extreme stress of lacking basic necessities, such as not knowing where the next meal will come from or where to sleep that night. (Peter P., et al. v. Compton Unified School District, et al. 1)

While the expectations of K/12 instructors to pay attention to students' behavioral and psychological needs are different than those of college instructors, the Compton suit is still pertinent here. Firstly, it outlines the cognitive effects of trauma on learners and also outlines potential teaching strategies for dealing with those learners, not only while trauma is happening, but also after the dangers have been removed. The suit goes on to claim that according to the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act, these students should be given access to disability services and protections, including training in what they call "trauma-informed teaching," which I think can be modified for the college level, even in classes in which trauma does not appear to be ubiquitous. We have no idea who is experiencing trauma and who isn't, but according to the suit," schools must intervene early and consistently according to professional standards in order to ensure that trauma does not determine a young person's

educational attainment and life chances”(Compton 3). In other words, if the cognitive effects of trauma on learning are not taken into account, they can have long-term and lasting effects.

And here we get to the reason why I take such umbrage at the flippant use of the term “neuroplasticity” or the horror with which pop psychologists write about their brains getting “rewired” by their smartphones. There *is* developmental damage, “wiring” damage, if you will, that can get done to the traumatized brain, that is very difficult—and sometimes impossible to reverse, especially if it occurs in childhood. Part of the Compton class action reads: “It is the brain’s plastic quality that allows us to learn, grow and adapt to new and novel situations. But it is unfortunately this same feature of the brain that causes trauma to have a profound effect on the developing brains of children” (Compton 34). All of the student plaintiffs in the Compton case, of which there are five (though one can assume many more students in the school district have similar stories) witnessed at least twenty shootings. One of these students was homeless and slept on the roof of a school building (an offense for which he was expelled,) another student saw his stepfather hold a gun to his mother’s head, another was arrested at gunpoint on a school campus because police believed he resembled a suspect for whom they were searching, another was sexually assaulted on the bus on the way to school and was later berated publicly by her teacher for being gay. The list, as you can imagine goes on and on. While these events would be difficult for any adult to handle, they are particularly dangerous for young people whose brains are still developing.

According to Besel van der Kolk, one of the foremost researchers of childhood trauma, “Neuropsychology and neuroimaging research demonstrate that traumatized individuals have problems with sustained attention and working memory, which causes difficulty performing with focused concentration, and hence with being fully engaged in the present” (“Clinical Implications of Neuroscience Research in PTSD” 280). While I’m reluctant to focus too much on neuroimaging, as I am a layperson in neuroscience, there is ample evidence that the brains of those who experienced repeated trauma in childhood have brains that are physically different than those who did not. For example, the hippocampus of the traumatized child is often less active (and often physically smaller) in the traumatized brain. The hippocampus is the part of the brain that controls the fight or flight response²⁹ and also is responsible for retrieving memories, but because of smaller hippocampal volume, traumatized individuals have less control over both fight or flight and memory retrieval than non-traumatized individuals. In other words: “memories may be processed abnormally, leading to both overrepresentation, such as intrusive thoughts or nightmares, or suppression, inability to recall memories, or selective amnesia” (Carrion and Wong 24).

Here it is important to talk about neuroplasticity, because traumatized people’s brains *can* be retrained, rerouted, and retaught. However, that retraining can take a great deal of work and care, which is why this group brings the suit against Compton. They are asking for “trauma-

²⁹ Larger hippocampal volume correlates with fight-or-flight *decision making*. In other words, decreased hippocampal volume (found in the traumatized person) correlates with a more rapid fight-or-flight response.

sensitive schools,” in order to help retrain these students’ brains, or at least not to do them any more damage. It is imperative that we do not see the traumatized student, either from Compton or the Hamptons as a lost cause whose brain is “damaged beyond repair,” because that rhetoric can further the damage of the trauma and it is simply not true. As van der Kolk says, “Working with trauma is as much about remembering how one survived as it is about what is broken” (“Clinical Implications of Neuroscience Research in PTSD” 289). But it is also important that we understand that these students have a much different relationship to memory and attention than those who did not witness upward of twenty shootings.

As I mentioned above, one of the main and perhaps most surprising consequences of trauma is that it often affects people’s ability to construct linear narratives and logical expositions. Neuroscience tells us that what distinguishes us as human is our large “neocortex” or “new brain,” which is the part of the brain that helps us explain our physical urges and predict, with some accuracy, the outcomes of our actions, but, in the words of van der Kolk, “this capacity to respond in a flexible manner emerges only slowly during the course of human development and is easily disrupted” (“Clinical Implications” 279). When outcomes are unpredictable due to poverty, abuse or violence, the logical structure of cause and effect is thwarted. This relationship can carry on into the classroom. In other words, even years after a trauma, the relationship between cause and effect can be somewhat confusing. One of the outcomes of this is that the expository form, which relies upon cause and effect can feel bewildering.

Logic in general can be a minefield for survivors of trauma, especially repeated trauma, because trauma itself lacks logic—and yet this illogical structure was the structure in which the subject learned to make sense of the world. As van der Kolk says, “the traumatic experiences initially were not categorized into a narrative and they seemed to serve no communicative function [...] When memories cannot be integrated on a semantic/linguistic level, they tend to be organized in more primitive ways of information processing: as visual images or somatic sensations” (“Trauma and Memory”) In other words, most memories are fit into an existing semantic schemata, part of the “story of my life,” and once the memory is “placed” there, it isn’t accessible as a memory separate from the rest of the story. Memories of trauma function quite differently. First of all, they are often purely sensory, without any semantic explanation attached. A non-traumatic memory might register as something like: “I went to our corner store and found my father there. It was a cold day and he was wearing a blue suit I’d never seen him in,” while the memory of a trauma would be more feelings of being cold, flashes of the father’s face, the periwinkle blue, the stickiness of the linoleum and the distinct pine smell of the store’s air freshener. Traumatic memories, too, are often isolated, not fitting into any existing story (there is no real sense in the traumatic flashes of memory, as in the first description, of what the father has ever worn before this day, or whether the rememberer has ever been in this store before.)

Eventually, when a narrative is constructed of the trauma, often years after the fact, the sensory is the basis of the story and the plot is laced in, as opposed to the other way around. A strange side effect of this type of memory, however is that unlike non-traumatic memory, which

disintegrates in accuracy over time, sensory information from traumatic memories remains intact, as vivid as though they were happening for the first time. This can make for some surprisingly stunning writing, but also can take the subject by very unpleasant surprise, if the memory strikes them out of the blue. In other words, by their very nature, traumatic experiences are unpredictable and disorienting and they can overwhelm attention both in the moment and in memory. Even long after the subject has learned to more or less “master” their memory so that traumatic memories don’t come galloping in unannounced as they are wont to do in active trauma or active PTSD, the subject’s memory structure, attention structure and sometimes even brain structure are still affected. Oftentimes, memories are still more sensory than plot-driven and still less linear than in those who have not suffered repeated trauma.

Dissociation is another common coping strategy for trauma which completely thwarts linear structure. The DSM-IV defines it as the state or states in which : “disconnection occurs in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception of the environment” (DSM-IV-TR 822). For example, a person might feel terror at the sound of a window opening but have no idea why, while that same person might be able to recount the story of witnessing a murder without any emotion at all. Those who suffer from dissociation can feel as though they are actually watching themselves from outside their own body, or—in extreme cases—finding themselves in the middle of a conversation (or even in another city) without knowing how they got there. These are great strategies for dealing with traumatic situations in which you are trapped—escaping from one’s body or one’s emotions may be one’s only way of

escape. But they become less practical once the trauma is over, and for some PTSD sufferers, dissociation is hard to stop even years after the traumatic event. The Compton case recounts situations in which students dissociate in class, triggered by being called on by teachers, or other seemingly innocuous events. In universities, such severe dissociative disorders are more rare because they make it difficult to function in a classroom setting. That said, even if one's dissociative disorder has been more or less treated, one can still find oneself with a number of memory gaps from past dissociations which, again, lead to problems with constructing narrative. Also, as I mention above, a person suffering the effects of complex trauma (either recent trauma or more complex trauma) has lessened control over which memories they access—and in which order. These factors make *remembering itself* disorienting, even if the topic of the memory is not traumatic. In fact, Pierre Janet called PTSD “a phobia of the memory” (661). And this can make personal narrative assignments, especially those that deal with the past, one's childhood, one's family or one's home particularly jarring. This is why it's important to always assign alternatives to assignments that ask students to dwell in memory, allowing students the option to write about the present, or at least the more recent past.

I'd like to return once again to Ray, and the fact that he couldn't concentrate on reading for fear of missing someone who might be coming at him. While the link between boredom and trauma has not been extensively studied, hypervigilance is considered one of the main symptoms of trauma, and the connection between vigilance and boredom has been studied extensively—and it turns out that tasks known as “vigilance tasks” are, according to a study by cognitive

scientists Eastwood et. al., “the epitome of ... boring” (485). A vigilance task is defined as: “A state of readiness to detect and respond to certain specified small changes occurring at random intervals in the environment” (Mackworth 1375). The classic example of a vigilance task is that of an air traffic controller. He must sit at his desk for eight hours staring at a computer screen just in case something might happen. Because he can’t actually concentrate on anything besides his job, but his job gives him almost nothing to do, the air traffic controller’s shift is incredibly boring. For students like Ray, this vigilance is required all day, every day. They must constantly be aware of their surroundings just in case “a small change occurring at random” is a threat to them or the people they care about. So I’d like to make the case here that vigilance, especially in response to something that requires a great deal of attention, like reading or writing, is one of the things that students sometimes call boredom, and one of the reasons that instructors might interpret a student’s affect as bored.

Reading, as Ray’s comment makes clear, requires a great deal of attention, with which vigilance of one’s surroundings seems to be at odds. However, by not considering the possibility that students’ attention is directed *toward* something besides the text for a reason--or toward a complex set of distractions brought about by the inexplicable workings of trauma, we do these students a disservice, and we inadvertently favor those students for whom paying attention to a text comes “naturally.” Unfortunately, I gave Ray some pretty bad advice when it came to reading: that is, I suggested he read in a room with the door locked. While this might seem logically sound, it does little to change the attention structures already in action. Perhaps

simplifying the environment would help, but because the threat had long been removed, a locked door wouldn't provide Ray any additional safety, and *may* provide him with a feeling of being trapped or a further reminder that he once needed protection. Instead, Ray needed to find a starting place where he could gather himself and find some traction to begin his literacy work. This is where van der Kolk's theory of "mastery" comes in.

4.4 PEDAGOGICAL OPENINGS

As I've outlined above, long after the danger that initiated the trauma has been removed, and even long after the victim of trauma has dealt with many of the psychological effects, trauma often has profound effects on attention and cognition, resulting in potential gaps in and difficulties with memory, difficulty with creating linear narratives and trouble with understanding and articulating cause and effect relationships. All of these effects can impinge on the writer's ability to write and the reader's ability to read, especially if ignored in literacy pedagogies.

The most important thing to note about the effects of trauma, at least as they relate to reading and writing, is that trauma is profoundly *disorganizing*. Think again of the "crucial bottleneck" Amso and Scerif claim attention needs to function properly. That is, without focus, attention is dispersed so widely it cannot be reined in. The student exposed to trauma, like any student struggling with attention, needs an organizing structure. In the next chapter, I will

discuss in-depth a year-long trauma-informed Composition course I taught, but here I would like to introduce the pedagogical principle that I believe best responds to that disorganization: what Besel van der Kolk and other trauma researchers call “mastery.” Mastery is not a popular word in Composition theory, which more commonly encourages students to dwell in “productive uncertainty” or to “fail better.” In fact, in the introduction to the ninth edition of *Ways of Reading*, David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky go so far as to call the goal of mastery “dangerous,” writing: “We would argue that these are *dangerous* goals, ‘mastery’ and ‘comprehension.’ We value what students can bring themselves to do with what they read and we measure their success in relation to the success of the project” (italics added, 14). Here, I believe they are talking about mastery as a type of dismissal, a skill which, once learned, can be forgotten. Graff and Birkenstein describe “mastery” similarly in their introduction to *They Say/ I Say*:

Think about an activity that you do particularly well: cooking, playing the piano, shooting a basketball... If you reflect on this activity, you’ll realize that once you mastered it, you no longer had to give much conscious thought to the various moves that go into doing it... What makes writers masters of their trade is not only the ability to express interesting thoughts, but their mastery of an inventory of basic moves that they probably picked up by reading a wide range of other accomplished writers (1).

Frankly, I’m not sure I agree. How unconscious is it, for say, Michael Jordan, to shoot a basketball under pressure? It might be second nature for a player of Jordan’s caliber, in most cases to *dribble* a basketball—and maybe even, I’ll concede, to shoot a basketball during practices,

but to shoot a basketball during playoff games still requires practice, focus, learning and thinking (literally in this case) on one's feet, even for the most masterful of players. The same is true for concert pianists, who can likely perform scales mindlessly, but still must keep themselves moving forward in order to perform concertos by Shostakovich and Rachmaninoff. And while I certainly don't paint myself as a master of writing, I have written thousands of pages of text and been published a few times, but never *once* have I sat down to write thinking, "hey man, this article is going to be a piece of cake. I know the moves." What I'm trying to say here is that master athletes, musicians, chefs and writers, never actually *finish* mastering their craft. They struggle with concertos and with novels, they lose championships, but they grasp on to the craft and keep working. The mastery I refer to here is not an endpoint but a driving force. Mastery is the act of climbing a mountain, not the experience of reaching the top. The mountain provides both a motivation forward and a foothold. In van der Kolk's words, mastery is "the feeling of being in charge, calm³⁰ and able to engage in focused efforts to accomplish goals" ("Clinical and Research Implications of Developmental Trauma Disorder" 408). Because trauma leaves its victims cognitively and attentionally ungrounded and untethered, the foothold is imperative, as is the incline—mastery gives writers a place to stand as well as a goal to reach.

It is true that most Composition students are not poet laureates. By this, I don't mean at all that they're not talented poets; I mean that no one has yet proclaimed them "masters" of

³⁰ "Calm" is also a sentiment that is not often prized in comp pedagogy, but is important to victims of trauma, and others who feel attentionally disorganized.

language and literature. In many cases, they may not feel like they have any mastery of language. Because I work largely with students who are on the periphery of academia and deemed in need of special help, I often work with people who claim to be “the worst writer” or “the worst reader” I have ever seen.³¹ So perhaps we help them look for footing somewhere, *anywhere* on the mountain to put their first foot—and then their second. And then we help them set goals further afield.

Where might some of these starting places be? We could help the student look for subject matter in which they are already interested and have a schema to build upon. We can also remember that students who have experienced trauma may make up, in clear vivid memory for scene, what they lack in ability to construct linear narrative, though we must tread lightly when assigning writings that require this kind of memory work, always allowing other alternatives. In my personal experience, the most fruitful place to turn has been to language itself. That is, to ask students as writers, readers, tweeters, song-writers, poets, orators, conversationalists, trash-talkers, listeners, obfuscators, and sometimes even tellers of half-truths—in short, as budding masters of language-- to pay attention to the language they use and the language around them and find a language that they call their own. I tell them they can write with whatever diction they like, but they must perfect it. They get to decide what “perfect” means, but they need to explain the choices they’ve made and they need to revise until they have a product they are proud of. In

³¹ “My God!” I usually exclaim, “I’ll be so impressed if you are!”

Digital Griots, Adam Banks argues for the inclusion of African American oral traditions in all literacy instruction for similar reasons of working toward mastery:

A [...]reason for a focus on the depth and complexity in African American oral traditions through the figure of the griot and forms like folktales, toasts, double-dutch rhymes, blues, hip hop and more is that it can provide a familiar bridge to other forms of literacy that offer relevance and begin with the premise of black mastery and celebration of language, of work and play in language, of the individual performer's and the audience's or communities' expectations and of the importance of both skills and critical consciousness" (32).

Here we can see that the focus on language mastery is not just about trauma. In fact, it need not necessarily be about trauma at all, but it gives writers a place to stand and climb as well as to play, to work and to celebrate. While there are other factors to consider in essay writing besides the language the student has chosen to use, work on language mastery can provide a footing for other goals as well as a sense of safety and identity from where to begin.

In "Whose Culture has Capital: A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth," Tara J. Yosso argues that students of color bring with them a variety of communication experiences undervalued by the academy, in the form of "oral histories, parables, stories (*cuentos*) and proverbs (*dichos*)." The skills, unrecognized by some professors, included in these forms may include: "memorization, attention to detail, dramatic pauses, comedic timing, [...] rhythm and rhyme" (79). You may notice that some of these skills, attention to detail in

particular, favor survivors of trauma in the ways that skills like articulating cause and effect do not. Giving students the option of beginning with forms with which they are familiar doesn't mean that we never ask survivors of trauma or others to learn skills like articulating cause and effect in writing, but that beginning with a familiar form can give them the grounding of mastery before they delve into something that is particularly difficult for them to grab on to.

Also, and I cannot overstate this point: neither Yosso nor Banks are dealing specifically with issues of trauma—they argue, as I will argue at length in the following chapter, that we should value students' language in its many forms not as a means to arriving at the traditional academic essay as some pinnacle of literacy, but because students' language *already has value*. I begin this dissertation with an epigraph from Saul Bellow that discusses boredom as a means of social control. When we denigrate students' use of language, both in syntax and in form, demanding they pay attention to and emulate a style of language we deem valuable without acknowledging the *equal value* of their own language, we not only miss out on opportunities for mastery as a beginning, but we perpetuate the social control of one style of language over another. Attention is not only the product of the brain's relationship to an individual technology or an individual trauma. Attention is also, as Richard Lanham points out, cultural capital. We must be careful of the ways in which we demand that capital and the implications of our demands.

5.0 SO IS THE WORLD LARGER: A PEDAGOGY OF RADICAL RHETORICAL
AGENCY

Let's begin by saying that we are living through a very dangerous time. Everyone in this room is in one way or another aware of that. We are in a revolutionary situation, no matter how unpopular that word has become in this country. The society in which we live is desperately menaced, not by Khrushchev, but from within. To any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible – and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people – must be prepared to “go for broke.”

“A Talk to Teachers,” James

Baldwin

In his 1963 “Talk to Teachers,” James Baldwin said “the crucial paradox which confronts us is that the whole process of education occurs within a social framework and is designed to perpetuate the aims of society,” which is a problem if the aims of society are biased and oppressive (“A Talk to Teachers”). Many writing teachers have progressive pedagogies, but

when confronted with the workload and realities of instruction, we're faced with that paradox: we claim pedagogies that value all cultures, Englishes, genres and formal structures, but our assignments most frequently perpetuate normative language structures. These two goals: students' right to their own language³² and proficiency in normative forms are inherently at odds.

An argument can be made that normative language structures will open doors for students, give them a seat in Burke's parlor, and that excluding students from these forms of English keeps them forever at the periphery of the academy and away from all the "cultural capital" contained within. But note the telling rhetoric of this argument: we, the instructors are the ones guarding doors, giving seats, and granting language and cultural capital. The students are, grammatically speaking, agentless. And, as University of Michigan education professor Tara J. Yosso points out, cultural capital, like paper money, has no value without agreement that this particular type of paper, or this particular type of culture, has worth. She says "cultural capital is not just inherited or possessed by the middle class, but rather it refers to an accumulation of specific forms of knowledge, skills and abilities that are *valued* by privileged groups in

³² In 1974, the Conference on College Communication and Composition published a treatise on "Students' Right to their own Language," arguing that Composition teachers nurture students' various dialects instead of insisting upon what they call "EAE" or "Edited American English." They write: "Students who want to write EAE will have to learn the forms identified with that dialect as additional options to the forms they already control. We should begin our work in composition with them by making them feel confident that their writing, in whatever dialect, makes sense and is important to us, that we read it and are interested in the ideas and person that the writing reveals. Then students will be in a much stronger position to consider the rhetorical choices that lead to statements written in EAE" (23).

society”(76), pointing out, for example, that computer-related skills, which the children of tech workers are more likely to have, are valued, while Spanish/English bilingualism, which the children of garment workers are likely to have, is not.

A further argument can be made, one I have personally made often, for a “bridge-model,” as opposed to a “deficit model” pedagogy, one that meets students where they are, with the language they have, sees those language structures as strengths and uses them to build toward adeptness in what is now considered the norm of successful academic English. This model seemed to me a happy compromise for some time, but now I’m forced to wonder at my own metaphor. To what golden shore does my bridge lead? Back, almost always, to Standard Written English and other normative structures, which, if I’m to be honest with myself, are language structures culturally coded as white. As Jerry Won Lee points out in his article “Beyond Translingualism,” “Many well-intentioned teachers follow the pattern on the basis they did not create the norms but they have a sense of responsibility to abide by them...However, [these practices] beyond merely working within established standards and conventions indeed create and perpetuate the standards and conventions themselves” (182). I can *say* as often as I like that I value other language structures, but if I only “allow” them in low-stakes assignments, or for occasional code-switching in sentences that are then decoded or explained for a default imagined audience who communicates in Standardized English, whatever I’m saying is just lip service and my actions indicate to students that normative forms (and whiteness) are what I value.

Baldwin says the job of teachers is to let the student (in this case particularly the African American student) know “that just as American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it, so is the world larger, more daring, more beautiful and more terrible, but principally larger—and that it belongs to him” (“A Talk to Teachers” 686). The same, I would say, is true of language, to which history is inextricably linked. Therefore, I argue for a pedagogy of radical rhetorical agency, one which facilitates critical thinking and decision making about writing, but does so with *language structures the students choose*—as long as there is evidence of awareness of those choices. Put another way: students should be aware of how language is received by specific audiences, but they should also be able to decide what audiences they want to reach. When students make choices about the language they use, they see the ways in which language belongs to them. From this place, they can decide if they want learn the rules of more normative language structures than they already know or forgo them, but we, as English instructors have to accept that the answer might be “no.” We can’t build a bridge, decide where it leads, try to drag our students to that shore and call that journey “agency.”

What follows is an account of a year-long course I taught for students at the University of Pittsburgh on football scholarship, all of whom were deemed in need of special help with writing. This is the same course I discussed in Chapter Two. As I mentioned previously, out of the nineteen students, eighteen were African American and one was Caucasian. I grew to know the students well. I knew about their daily exercise schedules, their family lives (including

multiple family member deaths, sometimes from murder) football injuries, and often, though I would rather not have been privy to this information, their love lives. The class was in some ways unique for its sense of community. The students were a tight-knit group of friends and this was the only course they were all in together. They also requested to have me teach them the second semester, so while I wasn't a full part of the community, I was peripherally accepted. This isn't a chronological account of the course but rather, an exploration of certain events in the class that made me rethink and articulate my stance on rhetorical agency, and to consider the structures and scaffolding that would best facilitate that agency.

What emerged was a pedagogy of radical rhetorical agency, one that focuses on experiment as a means to engagement and curiosity; one that argues for the expansion of who is assumed (or allowed) in the "audience invoked" in essay assignments in order that students might write for audiences in which, at the very least, they themselves are included and with whom they want to communicate; and one that relies upon Van der Kolk's theory of "Mastery," which allows students to begin from sites of skill and security and build toward new forms and take new risks while still maintaining a sense of self and safety.

5.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF EXPERIMENT

Class is in the "African Heritage room." The floor is a strange rubbery material, slightly granulated, which I guess is supposed to look like sand. The ceiling is thatched. There are glass

cabinets full of sculptures from all over Africa, small Egyptian jars, Yoruban fetishes, a framed photograph of Nelson Mandela. When I first found out we were placed in the room, I rolled my eyes: eighteen black students, one white student and a white teacher in the only room in the school that's dedicated to an entire continent as opposed to a country. The Cathedral of Learning, where the class was taught, has replicas of traditional classrooms from all around the world, but Europe is far more heavily represented than any other continent. The African Heritage Room always struck me as tokenistic, but the students like it. Here, the benches are larger than the regular desk chairs, large enough for the students to sit in. The guys are all over six foot tall, most about six foot four, and don't fit well in regular desks.

A few of the students are already there, eating their fast food, a smell that will permeate the classroom throughout the term. Isaiah walks in and presses the button by the door and laughs. "No!" I say, as the recording starts. The drumming isn't so bad, but then a bland female voice starts reciting her endless speech: The other guys groan too. It's Isaiah's daily joke—once you start the recording, you can't stop it. "You have entered the African Heritage Classroom, which, on December 17, 1989, became the 22nd member of Nationality and Heritage Rooms . . . Throughout Africa, courtyards are the center of family life. Learning and traditions are perpetuated there. . ." Jonas rolls in with one leg on a wheeled cart. He's hurt his foot—or his ankle, I can't remember which this time. Shawn comes in on crutches, a hip injury. The more of the guys arrive, the stronger the smell of fast food.

"Miss," says Cameron, before he's even sat down. "Can we get out early?"

“You just got here,” I shake my head.

“We’re tired,” he says. “We’ve been up since five.”

And they have been up, running and lifting weights, for hours. They stay up late at night, too—studying for classes and studying the playbook for practice. They’re exhausted every day. Still, we have to work. I try to get them talking about writing.

“I want to know what’s an essay you wrote you really liked.” They all laugh.

“Nothing.” “Nothing,” They say.

When I ask them why, Cameron says, “it’s all just gibberish.” I ask him what he means and he repeats: “it’s just *gibberish*, just gibberish, just a jumble of words.” Many, if not most, of the other students agree; they say they hate *all* writing. “Yeah it’s all nonsense.” “It’s too long.” “It’s like what do they want us to say?” and so on.

“Except poetry,” Darius says finally. He’s been sitting with his arms folded staring up at the ceiling in what I’ve learned is, for him, a gesture of thoughtfulness. Then he leans forward in his seat, brushes his dreadlocks out of his eyes and looks at me. “Can we write some poetry in here?”

“I mean, yeah. Of course,” I reply, surprised by the request. “Do the rest of you want to write poetry too?” Almost universally, they answer that they do. When I ask why they like poetry, they say that essays make them feel boxed in by someone else’s language but that poetry “helps you think about language in a new way.”

“You know about a person,” Lamar says. “Like if a person is always writing about love, you know he’s a dude who’s always thinking about love or whatever.”

By lucky chance, the poet Yona Harvey is visiting our class the following session and I ask her if she’ll do a poetry exercise with the students. She asks the guys to write to her telling her who their favorite superhero is. Earlier in the semester, Jonas, had written me an email that mentioned, in a fairly casual aside, that he had just lost his brother (to what I assumed then due to the nature of the email, and later found out was true) to murder. “I do not mean to kill the vibe or be a downer” he said in the email after he told me. I replied that he needn’t worry about me—that I was ready to hear about his brother should he want to write about him, but that I also wouldn’t bring it up unless he brought it up first. Jonas did not write directly about his brother until late in the semester, but an undercurrent of the murder ran through many of his assignments, which were often about sticking with your family no matter what.

Here is a response, what Jonas wrote to Harvey, which didn’t stand out to me at the time, though the poem that arose from it draws me back to it for a closer reading:

I’m writing to you in relation to our current topic in Professor Hall’s class which happens to be superheroes. Our assignment is to write to you about our favorite comic book character and I chose Flash. Barry Allen, also known as the Flash, is a DC comic superhero and is secretly the second character to be called “the Flash.” [Flash’s] abilities allow him to travel at the speed of light and sometimes beyond the world’s limit. I chose this superhero because he relates to my everyday life, as speed and urgency play a huge

role in it. Speed is required to play at the highest level in football, and urgency is needed to complete work academically as well as anything in life. Flash has always been my favorite superhero growing up as I was forced to choose a different superhero living in a household of five brothers.

Jonas had never mentioned his brother directly in any of his assignments to this point, but there was an undercurrent of the murder beneath almost everything he wrote, and looking back, I can see it in his email to Harvey: *Allow him to travel beyond the world's limit...speed and urgency...urgency... forced to choose...household of five brothers.* These are words and sentiments that ran underneath his work all year long, though he did write about his brother's murder a little more directly as the course went on.

In class, Professor Harvey had us read a series of epistolary poems to Superman by Lucille Clifton. ("If I should walk into that web," one of them reads, "who will come flying after me, leaping tall buildings. You?"³³) Harvey asked the students to write their own letter to their superhero in class. The emails the students had written came in quite handy, as they gave the writers a starting place from which to begin off the cuff. They wrote for about ten minutes. Many of the poems were similar to the original letters with a slightly different direction of address ("Hulk, you're my favorite superhero," instead of "The Hulk is my favorite superhero.") They were often thoughtful and sometimes heartrending, but the most surprising comes from

³³ "If I Should" by Lucille Clifton

Jonas, who wrote a poem that could have come, to my mind (and to Harvey's) from an MFA student or a seasoned poet:

It's funny how time seems to Flash,
One second you're Barry
The next you're flash.
You can travel through time,
but we both can't change
the past, we both lost
a part of ourselves
but decide to keep on
running.

While I find this to be an exceptional poem in its directness and especially in its enjambment, I don't mean to paint this as a moment of catharsis³⁴ for Jonas, either in his writing or in his experience of his brother's death. As far as I know, it wasn't. Jonas still reported disliking writing--poetry, actually, in particular, though he admitted that "he guessed he might be good at it." Furthermore, it is not my role as an instructor to try to initiate catharsis, no

³⁴ The word "catharsis" has to do with purging, purifying and relieving "abnormal" excitement. To assign writing assignments with catharsis as the end goal will, at best, be unsuccessful, and at worst, leave students feeling that their original emotions were impure or abnormal. In other words, catharsis should not be the goal of writing instruction.

matter what I may know about a student's private life. I find it interesting that while Jonas and other students resented the rules and what they considered to be the rigid structures of the essay, they had no such complaints about the epistolary structure of this poem assignment—perhaps in part because there was no penalty for breaking those rules, so they simply stood as guardrails to hold onto should the disorientation of trauma or the disorientation that comes from an unfamiliar writing assignment make them feel too untethered. This is an odd thing to say in the context of the horrific subject matter: but there also is an element of play in the poetry assignment, and in the equally serious poems that follow, that these students, and many others report not finding in the essays they are assigned. Whether or not Jonas liked writing this poem (and why would he? It must've been painful to write,) it gave him a foothold from which to own his place in the classroom. And somewhat paradoxically, this gave his classroom writing a life of its own outside the classroom—the poem now, with Jonas' permission, hangs on Harvey's office wall.

I return now to an idea which I introduced in the previous chapter, van der Kolk's theory of mastery: the experience in which survivors of trauma feel they have enough mastery over a task to feel a sense of calm, a sense of skill, and a willingness to experiment. Harvey's initial step: asking students to write her the email, and her ensuing steps: showing them Clifton's model and giving them an epistolary form with which to engage, helped Jonas find that foothold of mastery from which, not only to write about an incredibly difficult subject matter, but also to direct his address by naming a clear audience in both Flash and herself and writing in whatever language

he chose. He wasn't writing a paper to an anonymous Standardized English audience (who *are* those people anyway?) he was making a connection with language—his language.

In the following poem, another student, Malcolm, also finds a place to connect, this time in the repetition of form. The poem relies on a pattern from “Working Title” by Mahogany L. Browne³⁵, a poem in which every line begins: “The name of this poem is:”

Maybe the title of this poem is

Why not fight back

Or

Put your hands up

Or

Run and don't let them get close to you

Or

Make sure you don't resist

Or

Get them before they get you

Maybe the name of this poem is

Always have your camera on you and ready

³⁵ This exercise was introduced to my class by fellow graduate student and poet Gabrielle Ralambo-Rajerison, who spoke to the students about poetry.

Or

If I die I did not kill myself

Or

Intruder alert

Maybe the title of this poem is

I should have got a white girl pregnant

Or

I wish my kids weren't black

Or I wish I was white

Maybe the name of this poem is

I'm proud of my color and who I am

Or

My black is beautiful

Or

You can't define who I am

No matter what the name of this poem

Each one still matters

The form itself gives Malcolm a structure to return to should he get lost. In their book, *Habits of the Creative Mind*, Richard Miller and Ann Jurecic argue against beginning with structure. “The best time for you to make decisions about structure,” they counsel student writers, “is *after* you’ve formulated the question you want to answer, the problem or puzzle you want to solve, or the idea you want to explore and *after* you’ve taken the time to do substantial research. Once you’ve gathered your materials, then you can experiment. You can move the ideas around on paper or on digital index cards, testing out possibilities” (204). But for students with no idea where to begin, this advice can be paralyzing. How would one gather materials or come up with the original question? Furthermore, this suggestion sets up a strange division between structure and content. The structures themselves can generate ideas by providing places for the writer to return when he or she feels lost.

I do agree with Miller and Jurecic, that the line between structures that are generative and structures that are, in the words of Jacques Ranciere “stultifying,” is a difficult one. Few, if any among us, would purport to teach stultifying structures—and yet, countless students come into (and leave) writing classrooms feeling like the rules they’ve learned for essays are just a “jumble of gibberish.”

Students get the idea that essays follow strict yet inscrutable rules from somewhere. As writing instructors, most of us would like to believe that idea doesn’t arise from us, but it’s too simple to dismiss this as someone else’s problem. In my own teaching, I’m certainly guilty of

adding to this mentality. I've taught "parts" of the essay as series of ingredients that need to be assembled in order to complete the final project. I've taught the thesis as something that needs to be proven with a series of paragraphs, each claiming a point backed up by evidence and analysis of that evidence. I've taught the set of dance steps found in *They Say/I Say*. These formulae seem easy to follow and to some extent make logical sense. My goal was never to compel obedient writing, but rather to calm the anxieties of students who complained they had "no idea how to do this" or "no idea what you're looking for." Oversimplified formulae seem easy to follow, easy to grade, and, more importantly, easy for students to understand what they're being graded on. But in fact, these formulae end up being incredibly confusing to writers as soon as they have an idea that doesn't fit neatly inside whatever formula they feel the teacher wants—especially if it's a different formula than the last teacher wanted. As Hephzibah Rozkelly puts it: "Incoherence is directly opposed to chaos [...] Incoherence does not usually result from an overabundant chaos, but it frequently appears when order is imposed without chaos." (98) The result is not a productive disorder, but what Cameron calls "gibberish."

It is not only these acronym-laden formulae that can confound students, but even assignments that appear more fluid and open. Take Miller and Jurecic's advice for entering Burke's parlor, for example:

Eventually, after you catch the 'tenor' or drift of the conversation, a moment arrives when you feel you have something to contribute to the conversation and you 'put in your

oar.’ And so you begin writing, even as you know that you won’t have the last word—that no one will ever have the last word (26).

This description may seem inviting, but imagine yourself as a novice writer, perhaps one who has no sense whatsoever of what “putting in your oar” might look like and no sense whatsoever that the parlor is a place you would like to be. The writers seem to be indicating something in particular by asking the students to “put in their oars” and to “contribute to the conversation,” especially since the assignment they follow up with is quite particular: they ask students to read essays about animal welfare and euthanasia and answer the question “to what extent is it possible to define what makes a ‘good life’ (or a ‘good death’) for humans and other animals?” (31). This question itself doesn’t, at least at first glance, allow for a variety of forms, especially for someone who has come from a five-paragraph background—and students like Jonas (and many others in the class) who have been close to violence, no matter what the assigned readings are, are likely to answer this question as abruptly as they can so they can get out of that particular parlor. Please don’t misunderstand me—I respect Miller and Jurecic’s book a great deal and have used it myself, but I can also see how even their openness could be construed as rule-based.

As a class, it was useful to write poetry so that we could move forward as a community of writers—first because I responded to the students’ request for the language they wanted to use. But just as importantly, the turn to poetry helped the class as a whole start to look at the powers

of language, helped the students look at the kind of work they wanted language to do in their own lives, the kind of writers they wanted to be.

5.2 IT'S CALLED SOCIAL IDENTITY: IMAGINING A LARGER AUDIENCE

Perhaps the difference between the poetry assignments and the essay assignments was there was no penalty for breaking the suggested structures in the poetry assignments—the forms were presented as beginnings. There is no reason that the essay can't be that same type of opening. I wanted to open up ideas of what the essay could be, but first, I wanted to figure out what the students thought an essay *was*. The first day of the second semester, I had the students read hip hop essayist and music reviewer Greg Tate's poem "What is Hip Hop?" and write a response entitled "What is an Essay?"

Here are a few lines from Tate's poem:

hip-hop is digital chips on the shoulders of African lips

hip-hop is black Prozac

hip-hop is if you can't join 'em, beat 'em, if you can't beat 'em, blunt 'em

hip-hop is black sadomasochism

hip-hop is where the hurting ends and the feeling begins or is that the other way around?

hip-hop is how we rip off the nad aids and pour saltpeter on the wounds

hip-hop is Ralph Ellison, who once said the blues is like running a razor blade along an

open sore.

(“What is Hip-Hop?” 239).

Here is Darius’s response poem to “what makes an essay:”

Oversimplifying

Intro

Body paragraphs 3-5

Conclusion

Details

Thesis statement

3-5 paragraphs about the thesis

Proving yourself right

I wouldn't say that essays are pointless.

They are redundant.

BUT . . . they are for a grade.

Darius is a man who has an ability to expose the unwritten rules (a Kaepernick in the making, if there ever was one) which he’s done here. Especially interesting to me is the fact that he argues that the point of an essay is “to prove yourself right.” What a pointless task! There’s

more to be gained from running in circles. There's no sense of play or experiment, just trudging down a well-worn road, or around a well-worn track, for which you'll get penalized for going off path. I think this poem describes pretty accurately what many students feel is the formula for the essay—and with this in mind, it's no wonder the very mention of the word “essay” drives student writers into an almost trance-like boredom. Even in his few short lines, he repeats the ingredients: 3-5 paragraphs, 3-5 paragraphs, thesis, thesis. Do it correctly and the authority gives you a grade. Why would *anyone* want to write or read such a thing?

Daniel, too, focuses on the minutiae of essay writing: keep it double spaced, punctuate properly. Unlike Darius' weariness over the drudgery of the ingredients of essays, Daniel seems to be feeling some anxiety over remembering the many rules:

Pen or pencil either way you can write an essay,

Don't forget to indent, need that to write an essay,

teacher after teacher always say keep it double space,

Talk about your life a little bit, just keep it double space,

How have you been? Release some stress into your essay,

If you mess up you can always revise an essay,

Make sure you put a period at the end of every sentence when writing an essay,

Some people say fuck writing an essay,

Essays are sometimes long so I agree fuck an essay,

This is a poem but still something like an essay,

If you didn't know a poem could be an essay.

Pen or pencil you can still write an essay.

Note that Daniel waffles between remembering the rules and being resentful of those rules: sure, it's fine to write a little bit about yourself, as long as you keep it double-spaced. That is to say, according to Daniel, the rules of the essay are more important than content. I would like to believe that Darius and Daniel got these ideas anywhere but from me, but since I was their English teacher the previous semester, it would be difficult for me to make that claim convincingly. I never taught the thesis-driven or five paragraph essay in the class, but I didn't trouble those forms either. I didn't, in the words of Jerry Won Lee, take into consideration that "Standardized English is not merely an object to be acquired and used, but also an object to be *interrogated*" (*Politics* 98). In other words, if I were to teach Standard Written English and normative essay forms as defaults, I should've at least called that status into question. I should have at least acknowledged that there is nothing particularly standardized about Standardized English in the first place. As Lee writes:

Any reference to standardized spelling must be tongue-in-cheek, even if we are talking strictly about inner circle varieties, as there is no 'standardization' even in the spelling of the word 'standardisation' between the two inner circle varieties, US English and UK English, regarded as the most prestigious in many sociolinguistic contexts (*Politics* 93).

Inconsistencies like this are rife throughout formal English, not only in spelling but in punctuation, grammar and syntax, not only across nationalities, but across citation styles, regions of the US and even classrooms within the same university. Most students have some story of being told explicitly to do one thing by one professor in their papers and being rebuked by another professor for doing the very same thing. It's no wonder that trying to write with this ever-changing set of rules can be stifling, and that students can feel that writing is more about following rules than making meaning.

But the fact that Standardized English rules are confusing is more than just a quirk, it's part of the fabric of "standardization." Lee writes: "Standardized English is always in the process of being readapted in order to serve the interests of those who can benefit from its continued privileged status" (*Politics* 96). Of course, I wanted my students to be able to benefit from the status of Standardized English *if they so chose*, but I didn't believe that I, the white teacher of a primarily black student body, should be the one to make that decision. These young men are not fools. They know the place SWE has in American culture. They also know the ways it excludes them from their own sense of self and culture (much better, I might add, than I do.) I didn't feel that troubling SWE while still insisting upon its use was enough to treat other forms of English with equal value.

Who is the imagined audience, the "audience invoked" by Standard Written English? Here, I refer to Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford's seminal 1984 article "Audience Addressed/Audience Invoked: The Role of Audience in Composition Theory and Pedagogy," in which they

distinguish between the audience explicitly addressed in an essay and the “invoked” audience, that which is “called up or imagined by the writer” (156). According to Ede and Lunsford, “The writer uses the semantic and syntactic resources of language to provide cues for the reader—cues which help define the role or roles the writer wishes the reader to adopt in responding to the text” (160). And again, I wonder who we are asking students to imagine when we ask them to take on the semantic and syntactic resources of Standard Written English?

“White standards” writes June Jordan, “control our official and popular judgments of verbal proficiency and correct or incorrect language skills” (Jordan 364). Add to this factors of social status that correspond with SWE and it’s no wonder that some students take umbrage at, or simply do not connect to, this imaginary group of addressees. Carmen Kynard tells us we need to “interrogate *the daily operation of white supremacy in our field and on our campuses*” (14). And I believe that diction is one place (of many) that we can do this. Kynard urges us to move “away from ONLY imagining a white audience when we write about race, literacy, life and schooling” (14). I wanted to see if I could work with my students toward a wider range of imagined audiences, one in which they themselves felt included and addressed. With this in mind, I rewrote the syllabus to the class. It began as follows:

Here’s a question: What if you brought the same intensity to the classroom you bring to the football field?³⁶ Can you imagine how much each one of you could do? Think of athlete-scholars like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar or heroes like Muhammad Ali, or dudes like

³⁶ When I read this question out loud in class, one of the students shouted out: “It’d be LIT!”

Marshawn Lynch or Colin Kaepernick who are making waves in their home communities. *You* guys could be *those* guys. But that takes effort and focus, and I think we need to work on both in this class. So we're going to need some new rules. Here they are:

1. You can write with whatever language is the best language to express your ideas in that particular paper. That is, if you want to work on your "academic-sounding" English, that's fine, if that's the best way to get your ideas across. If you want to write like you're hanging out on a porch in Florida with your friends, that's fine too, if *that's* the best way to get your ideas across. But keep in mind, your essays are gonna be *polished*. We're going to revise them, sometimes more than once, to make sure that you're using the best, clearest, most beautiful Florida porch slang (or Bronx slang, or Spanglish or English Professor English) you've got. Use the language that keeps you most interested and makes your writing feel most alive. The language you put on the page is an extension of yourself, and I want you to be proud of it. We're going to make it as good as it can possibly be, which means revision.

You may notice that I mention that the students could write, if they so chose, in "Florida porch slang." This particular line was directed at a student named Marshall, who had just recently begun to write in a deep Southern Florida English. At the beginning of the year, I had

no idea where Marshall was from—he was quiet, but when he did talk, he showed no sign of an accent at all. He wrote in a version of SWE, but in a way that Roskelly may have described as incoherent (as opposed to chaotic) as in the following example when he was discussing police violence: “Like a quote I read a while ago ‘We must learn to live together as brothers or we will perish together as fools’ (Martin Luther King Jr.). So this war will go on forever until both sides come to an agreement or learn to get along.” Then one day, in a poetry assignment responding to the election of Donald Trump, Marshall wrote this:

Dear America, I don't know how to fucking write poems

They seem soft to me I mean there do be some hard shit that need to come out

Most of them that teachers show to me I throw them out

Half the time I don't even know what them shits about

Swear that bih³⁷ don't be saying anything that's why they washed out

I asked him, “Marshall, is this the way you talk at home?” He told me it was but that people up North didn't understand him so he didn't talk like that up here. I said it must be exhausting to keep that inside, and he said “it really tires me out, Miss.” So I told him he could

³⁷ “Bih” is a word from the deep south which on its face is something of an abbreviation of “bitch” but is used kind of like the word “jawn” in Philadelphia—in other words, a regional word that means “thing” and is used for basically *everything*, although “bih” can be used to refer to people, whereas “jawn” cannot. When I asked him about his use of the word “bih,” in a low-stakes assignment it turned out he identified with it *very* strongly. Later, as you'll see, he wrote an essay about the term. While the gendering of the term is problematic, Marshall used it to refer to people (and objects) of all genders in a non-derogatory way.

write in whatever way he wished. From then on, he wrote in his Florida vernacular, on most, but not all, of his remaining papers. Let's look at an excerpt by Marshall from our second assignment of the semester, a music review of the group Migos: "Around the time they dropped *Young Rich Niggas*...they took off for real, all gas no breaks bih, because lowkey that when the crakas realized they was fye too and once they vibe with ya music too, ya finna be in the business for a while." Compare the language to another essay, one he wrote for the Tate assignment, a biography of Ernie Davis: "Ernest Davis," his paper begins, "born December 14, 1939 in New Salem PA, commonly known as Ernie Davis, was a football player that changed the game and his story has been passed down for generations now."

I realize there are those who would far more appreciate Marshall's Ernie Davis essay, who would argue that it is better writing, or more academic, but frankly, I disagree. I will say this: Marshall had no skin in the game with the Ernie Davis essay. He was just trying to get the assignment done. But also, I think the Migos essay has more to offer. In part, this is because Marshall's language use in the second essay is a lot more—*Marshall*—and this endears me to it. When I read the second essay, I can see him, sitting stretched out between two chairs, lanky, with tall hair and thick glasses, complaining, "I'm so hungry, Miss," but eventually getting excited about some topic that invigorated him: the election, Black Lives Matter, or Migos. The language of the music review reminds me of an alive human being. I also think there is a great deal going on in that essay, maybe more than the Ernie Davis essay—it's not to say there's not content to be found there; it's about racism in the NFL and Marshall's relationship to his father

with whom he watched the Davis biopic—but the Migos essay has an urgency that coincides with the themes that were important to Marshall throughout the semester: namely, how language, especially Southern language, at once relates to home and invents new rules. Marshall was interested in the fact that people, specifically white people (and in one paragraph, specifically me, as I had commented that I'd grown to like Migos the more they were played in the classroom) listened to what they had to say, took the time to decode *their* language for once.

Migos are a hip-hop group, popular at the time of this writing, who hail from Atlanta. They're known for their strange lyrical style, which Marshall says some people interpret as "they not even saying the right words" so "niggas can't understand them." One of the lyrics Marshall picks out as an example is "Raindrops (drip,) droptops, droptops" ("Bad and Boujee").

"Now hold on," writes Marshall. "Cut the music. Let's get this shit straight because them lyrics is not straight at all my friends . . . Rain drops indicate rain so if you making millions why the hell would you be in a drop top—answer me that?" The answer to this riddle turns out to be that Range Rover recently came out with a convertible, a "drop top." The song the lyric is found in, "Bad and Boujee," is about coming up from poverty into wealth and the lyric is about having enough money to buy a Range Rover and get it wet. More importantly, though, it's about the ownership of language. They've gotten a wide audience to decode, understand and use their language, strange as it is, something Marshall very much admires.

I'll be the first to admit that I could have and should have pushed Marshall further in his linguistic analysis, as well as in his analysis of sexist themes, which arise frequently in Migos'

lyrics, but the intellectualism is there. It's also my belief that the sexism of Migos lyrics and questioning the potentially problematic origins of the word "bih" can happen down the line, but that seeing Marshall engaged with language could happen first. I was excited to see Marshall following a thread—something he'd been wondering about all semester—namely: how do we change the diction of discourse?

We can see in his Ernie Davis essay that he's capable of writing in Standard Written English, if that's something he needs to do (something, incidentally, he seemed incapable of doing until *after* he began writing with his Florida English.) As Adam Banks points out, "usually phrases like 'academic discourse'... guide our theorizing and pedagogy... implying the main—or even the only—goal is to prepare students to move away from the home community and its discursive practices" (31). Banks points out that this can further alienate African American students and deny those students "powerful examples and sources of knowledge" from their home communities. Further, Banks notes that African American students whose 12th grade National Assessment of Educational Progress essays "demonstrated familiarity with black discursive patterns scored higher than students who weren't as familiar with such patterns, showing that students grow more in standardized English use and mainstream discourses when they are at home in their own language traditions" (32). To this, I would add, and I think Marshall would also add, that standardized English isn't the only English we need to know. English is alive and always changing. As James Baldwin points out in "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?" supposedly "non-standard" Englishes become "standard"

English all the time: “I do not know what white Americans would sound like if there had never been any black people in the United States,” Baldwin writes, “but they would not sound the way they sound” (“If Black English”). And while Marshall may need to know how to write like Wikipedia in order to fill out the occasional job application, his way of writing has as much of a place in English as does the language of literary theory, even if we as readers have to teach ourselves how to read it.

I understand, and Marshall understands, that writing in a more formal English may open doors for him that writing like Migos may not (though for the members of Migos themselves, this is not true—and this linguistic freedom is, in fact, the subject of Marshall’s paper,) but, first of all, it’s Marshall’s choice if he wants to open those doors. Second of all, Marshall needed to find some place where language belonged to him to even begin to engage with writing at all. In my class, writing essays on comic books, which the students asked to do, did not work, nor did writing about his favorite athlete, which Marshall chose to do. The only thing that got Marshall interested in writing—and that got Marshall writing work that shows what Adam Banks calls “both skills and critical consciousness,” (32) was using *language* that excited him. And frankly, I think it’s exciting language. I can learn how to listen to Migos and how to read Marshall’s writing, just as students learn to read Shakespeare. Students don’t need to explain AAVE³⁸ or Spanglish or any other kind of language to teachers, or to code switch for white audiences.

³⁸ This is another term I dislike a great deal; I don’t think there is anything close to *one* African American vernacular English any more than there’s one White vernacular English. In the class referred to in this chapter alone, there were multiple distinct vernaculars.

Instead, we need to imagine, as Kynard says, an audience that is not *only* white. We've learned to read everything from Anzaldúa to Žižek, we can learn to read our students. Also: when students pay attention to the way they make sense and sentences with language—and when they pay attention to the ways other writers in the class and other published writers are making sense and sentences, without valuing one of these ways as “right,” they see decisions they have already made, knowingly or not, and the possibilities for decisions they can make. They see English as, in the words of James Baldwin, larger.

This is a different project than diagramming sentences or learning grammar “rules”—it's the project of paying attention to themselves and their classmates and Virginia Woolf and Ta Nehesi Coates and making decisions about the language and language structures they use. These are concepts Marshall understands well. In another essay, he wrote:

People ask why I say *bih* too much if they ain't from the crib. It is called social identity and everyone has that no matter where they're from, *bih*. It means to basically act different around certain people--like me for instance when I talk to people from da crib I can talk like how I talk if I'm vibin with my niggas. But on the contrary if I was in a job interview or trying to talk respectful to an adult or anything in that category I would speak in this manner.

I don't mean to act like these are choices to be taken lightly; I don't think Marshall does either. As I said earlier, it would be foolish to assert that these students don't understand the cultural capital of Standard Written English. Marshall writes about this capital on various

occasions. It would be infantilizing for me to explain to Marshall when and where he needs to use wield this capital—he already knows the place of SWE in “success.” But in the words of Jerry Won Lee: “success is often a code word for assimilation because the enterprise of academic writing in English is based on a paradigm in which a vast majority of users of peripheralized Englishes are made to aspire to assimilate into a dominant culture” (*Politics* 107). It’s not my place to tell Marshall to assimilate if that’s not his goal. As Vershawn Young writes, “I’m not saying, as so many often do, that black students shouldn’t see WEV (White English Vernacular) as a threat to their identity. I think they have every right to” (Young 710). We need to allow for the possibility that those who are not using Standardized English are making that choice because they don’t *want* to use it.

Here we can return to Jerry Won Lee’s concept of “inscrutability,” that I touched on in Chapter Three. There, I discussed the inscrutability of stuplime writing, which, in students is often seen as a failure and in established writers is often seen as brilliance. Lee also talks about purposeful inscrutability. That is, “the right to be *not understood* insofar as being understood is only to be done according to dominant norms and criteria” (58). One might say that Marshall was trying to be inscrutable in his “Bih” and Migos essays—and to some extent this is true; he was writing to include some readers and to *exclude* others, just as Anzaldúa and Žižek do. “Humans naturally use language to make their meaning more clear and striking,” Peter Elbow writes, “but they also like to use language to make their meaning *less* clear—to use language as a kind of filter or puzzle or game to distinguish among receivers” (16). Marshall is invoking an

audience with these essays—not just people already in on his language game, but also those willing to work to decode the slang he brings to the table. Lee argues for a “paradigm in which inscrutability is not presumed to be a defect of knowing but rather *constitutive* of knowing. We need to take seriously,” he argues, “the possibility that the problem of being unable to understand the Other is not a problem of the Other’s language practice per se but a problem that derives from a refusal to relinquish or uninhabit a normative epistemology of interpreting language practice” (58). With this in mind, I argue that we, as teachers and scholars, put simply, learn to read for a broader audience invoked. This doesn’t mean that I, God forbid, correct Marshall’s use of Black English Vernacular as though I’m an insider but it does mean that I assume, as I do with the published authors mentioned above, that there is work with ideas and language going on in Marshall’s writing even if I have to struggle a bit to understand it.

5.3 STRUGGLING TO FIND COMFORT: VAN DER KOLK’S THEORY OF MASTERY

When I began the second semester course, I wanted to introduce a broader array of essay styles, but I stumbled a bit as I tried to “open up” the essay form in the class. Because the students had asked me if they could read about African American history, and because I wanted them to work on research, I offered them a brilliant essay, also by Greg Tate, entitled “Just Say No,” written in

2005, which was a eulogy for the then-recently deceased Rosa Parks. Here are the first two sentences:

The only real power we the people posses, as individuals and en masse is our deafening power to absolutely say no to the bullsheet. All those prescient and very pregnant Afrikans who tossed themselves overboard during the Middle Passage figured this out while sailing across the Atlantic in boats only built for Cuban links, as did the self-liberated captives aboard the Amistad who made the epiphanal discovery that sharp steel can tear open throats of any color (“Just Say No”).

As you can see, in these few lines, Tate has referenced the Constitution, the Middle Passage, Amistad and the Cuban links. In the 990 word article, Tate references everything from Brown v. the Board of Education to the Weather Underground to Assatta Shakur to Abu Ghraib, much of which we needed to break apart to make sense of the essay (and we did, with each student preparing a mini-presentation on the topic of his choice.) This was enlightening but overwhelming to students. As Marshall put it in his blog post, reading it “make me feel like I do not know enough.” Aside from being brilliant and beautiful, this essay is *dense*. We had gone from boring, stifling rules of the essay (double-space, 3-5 paragraphs, thesis, thesis) to the groundlessness of what *appear* to be no rules at all. This is not to say that the piece wasn’t worth reading or that the structure wasn’t worth investigating, but the jump may have been too big.

This is an essay that should have come late in the semester instead of at the beginning.³⁹ When it came time to write, I think many of the students felt untethered, especially because my assignment was also pretty open-ended: I asked them to write an essay “inspired by Tate about an historical or cultural event, figure or movement that you think has bearing today.” The topics from Tate’s essay could serve as topics if the students so chose, though they could write about other topics of their choosing. I also encouraged them to “let go of the five paragraph essay, thinking of both Tate’s “what is hip-hop” or “Just Say No” as possible sites of inspiration, though I told them it was up to them what it meant to be inspired by Tate. Basically, I was asking them for something very specific without letting them know what that was. And most of them returned, predictably, to the five paragraph essay. How were they supposed to write about An Historical Event for a Contemporary Audience and not use Standard English while still doing whatever it was Ms. Hall wanted of them to get a good grade? In what other structure, besides the essay format they remembered from high school, would they place their newfound dump of information about something so overwhelming as Birmingham or Abu Ghraib?

This pedagogy of radical rhetorical agency, in other words, does not work if we simply drop students midair and tell them to write whatever comes to mind in whatever voice they so

³⁹ I found that the assignments that worked best for larger essays were those in which students read a handful of published essays that bore formal similarities and identified formal structures that they wanted to emulate in their own writing. In other words, they learned to read as writers and write as readers. I no longer assign specific essay topics—students always decide what they want to write about, though there are certain guidelines: an epistolary essay, for example, or an essay on an historical subject of their choosing. The one exception was the music review, which they had agreed upon as a class. Also, I never require them to stay true to the original prompt for their revisions.

choose. Students must have a clear idea of what we expect of them, and a clear foothold from where to begin and to return should they feel ungrounded. We can see, for example, how the structure of the poetry assignments mentioned earlier helped Malcolm and Jonas when they felt lost—they had a pattern to return to, or to ignore if they didn't feel they needed it. Again I return to van der Kolk's idea of mastery. Mastery, this sense of grounding, is not a benefit only for those untethered from attention by trauma, but also for many others struggling to pay attention to writing, especially if they feel marginalized by the language or genres or attention structures at play in the writing classroom. Choice is certainly one part of mastery, but so, too, are clear expectations. "Mastery," writes Van der Kolk, "is ...the feeling of being in charge, calm and able to engage in focused efforts to accomplish goals ("Developmental Trauma Disorder" 408). The factor of calm is important here, especially for those who may feel peripheralized in writing classes or those who have been affected by trauma. But how do we find this site of calm? In some cases, it's simply a case of finding something the writer is good at; in others, it is not assuming that the student is trying to pull one over on you if they write an essay that doesn't fulfill your expectations, but assuming instead that they are trying to find a place to begin.

One of the most disappointing first drafts for the Tate assignment came from Victor, who seemed completely flummoxed by the assignment. He was a new student to me second semester and a little hard to get a read on. He was soft-spoken, but I'd been warned that he "had a temper on him," not that he'd yell, but that he would storm out of a room easily, get his feelings hurt easily. This may have been true, but I never saw it happen. He often stared off into

space; he fell ill more than the average student, often mid-class, easily overwhelmed by the heat or cold or nausea, but he never left in a huff.

For his Tate paper, to my surprise, he wrote about the movie *Scarface*. Though his essay began with a few sentences describing the history of the Cuban embargo, it was difficult to figure out how it related to the prompt, as it was mostly an off the top of his head synopsis of the plot, as in the following: “Tony starts off in a refugee camp in Florida where him and his right hand man Manny were located. At first Tony and Manny were poor, but had a lot of ambition to be something with themselves.” He goes on to describe Tony’s rise to power: “Manny realizes something is wrong and kills the Columbians. When one tries to escape Tony chases him into the street with pedestrians all around. He doesn’t care and guns him down in front of everyone.” The paper concentrates both on this gun violence and Tony’s dedication to his family: “Tony has a little sister and a mother that live in Florida as well. He is extremely protective of his little sister [...] Tony’s little sister and him haven’t seen each other in years and he does not know how to handle her being so grown up and mature,” but Victor never analyzes either of these phenomena, simply choosing to mention them and then move quickly on to the next plot point. Nor does he describe Tony’s eventual murder, only his dead body “shown under a statue of a globe saying ‘the world is yours.’” Victor then wraps the essay up with the requisite philosophical take-away:

Sometimes in life, faith, hard work, dedication is all you need [...] In many ways, we all need to have a Tony Montana mindset and say forget what anyone else thinks, I’m

attacking my goals. I'm not saying to become a drug dealer and commit crimes but know that if you really set your mind to something and pursue it to the fullest, not many things will stand in the way.

This proclamation is pretty clearly negated, of course, by the picture Victor has just painted of Tony's corpse slumped under a globe, but one can assume he's following what he believes to be the expectations of the college essay. It was not an impressive piece of work, not even a passing piece of work, and as it was the first essay I'd seen out of Victor, I had some concerns that this might be the level of writing I could expect from him throughout the semester. But it does contain what I now know are some themes that Victor writes about regularly: family (particularly his sister and his mother) and an exploration of violence.

When I asked him, in conference, why he'd decided to write about Scarface, his answer surprised me. He answered quietly, but matter-of-factly: "My uncle always told me that when he went out, he wanted to go out like Scarface, and he did. He got gunned down that same way." He then proceeded to tell me the story of his uncle's murder, and then his cousin's murder, and then his brother's murder in excruciating detail, still quiet, still matter-of-fact. "But my uncle was the first one," he said.

I'm reminded here of Sianne Ngai's discussion of Jameson in her chapter on stuplimity. Complaining about the "schizophrenic" nature of avant-garde writers, Jameson writes: "if ...the subject has lost its capacity to...organize its past and future into coherent experience... it becomes difficult to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but 'heaps

of fragments” (286). A description, in this case, of Stein, Beckett, and Cage but also a description of trauma. Ngai explains: “if we follow the logic of Jameson’s passage, ‘coherence’ refers primarily to a preexisting concept or idea of order, dictating in advance how particles are brought together in the first place” but there are, as we can see from the way essays are formed, and from the way particles are formed, order is not always so predictable, nor is it always so... orderly. But, as Ngai points out, “as anyone with agricultural, office, laundry or postal experience can attest, a heap is an organization, though perhaps not a particularly organized looking one” (291). In all honesty, it didn’t look to me with the *Scarface* paper like Victor was throwing anything of value in the pile. Only now, that I’ve seen enough of his writing piled up, can I see the same ideas heaped together over and over: guns, family, sisters, a dead body slumped cruelly under a sign that says “the world is yours.” He was beginning to pile together ideas. I just couldn’t see it yet.

Victor told me he wanted to write about his uncle’s murder, which had been a big news story at the time, in order to help other people who hadn’t experienced the same level of loss know what it was like to live with such violence, but he didn’t know how to ground an essay like that—or even where to begin. We decided he could start with him writing about the discussion they’d had about *Scarface*. But when it came time that revisions were due, Victor’s was noticeably missing. Victor himself was gone from the next class meeting. The next time I saw him, I told him I needed the essay as soon as possible. I tried to be firm, but he told me he’d missed class due to a memorial for the anniversary of his brother’s murder and honestly,

strictness was difficult for me under these circumstances. He told the athletic advisor he'd changed his mind, he was going to write about something else, but I couldn't understand what his new topic was (maybe the Cuban Embargo? I can't recall; his description was jumbled.) In the following class, I told Victor he'd have to come meet with me to talk about the new topic and he announced, "I did it," and more or less shoved the revised paper into my hand. I was nervous to read it, concerned it wouldn't be better than the first, especially since it had taken so long for him to write anything at all. Instead, I found an essay that seemed like it had been written by a completely different person. Here is an excerpt:

Summers in South Brunswick, New Jersey were always the same for me. Driving through town with windows down, staring at the green grass and trees around. Or riding with a few friends blasting music trying to find our next move in the day. What I remember more than anything is countless days of being outside with the sun beaming off my helmet, the sweat dripping off my jersey, and struggling to find comfort in my cleats because the turf felt like hot cement.

I was struck by the vividness of these first few lines and had to set the paper down to catch my breath a bit. We had worked on concrete, significant detail in class⁴⁰, but Victor had

⁴⁰ In "Concrete Significant Detail" in-class assignments, students describe a scene using what I call "the emotional camera." I explain that everyone would describe the same classroom differently depending on how they were feeling, and each description would tell a different story (if I'm writing an essay about my first day as a teacher, for example, and describe my shoes and the floor, I'm probably nervous. If I describe the eyes of all my students, I'm probably more attentive.)

always seemed to be in a world of his own, and nothing he had written thus far had indicated to me that he could write such vibrant descriptions.

Next, he zooms in on a particular day football practice in 6th grade:

Practice was going smooth and everything seemed to be going great when all of a sudden a loud pitch scream from a distance caught my attention. [My mom] was the person who had screamed. The fields were spray painted onto a regular open grass plain behind the town's middle school. My mom was behind one of the far fields.

Here are the next two paragraphs:

In July before the start of football that year, my family [...] was having a big cookout with a DJ in New Brunswick at my aunt's house. It started around 3 and all my cousins and family were there. I was sitting with my sister most of the night because I felt too young to hang out with my older cousins and dance with them plus I was shy. With the salsa music blasting there were plenty of my family dancing around the yard. Also in the corner just like at every family party you can expect an intense game of dominoes being played by my older uncles and cousins. My uncle Tata was grilling, drinking and having fun. Whenever my family members talk, it would never be a normal conversation, they yell and have shouting matches so no one can get a word in. In one group of my uncles they were talking and I can remember my uncle shouting, "when go out, I wanna go out like Scarface!" Later that day after the cookout I asked my mom what he meant by that and she simply told me its from a movie I'm not allowed to watch, so of course I watched

it later that day. Seeing all the violence and drugs involved and seeing how it ended, I couldn't understand why he would joke about going out like him. But it was how my uncle was, he was a tough hard working and passionate man.

In Bristol, Pennsylvania, a man by the name of Robert Diamond was fired from his job at Simon and Schuster. Robert Diamond was known as a loner and was occasionally confrontational. He was fired because he was accused of being racist and was uncooperative with his coworkers[...] His plan was to kill his boss, who was black, and anyone else black who came in his way. On August 1, 2008, Robert Diamond drove around for about an hour before pulling up to his old workplace. My uncle was Puerto Rican and seemed to fit the profile [...] Robert Diamond opened fire from a distance. My uncle was hit a couple times and he stopped the car. My uncle was hurt badly and he punched the car door open. However, for some reason, my uncle did not try to run. He looked his shooter in the eye and began trying to walk towards him. He could not walk for long and collapsed to the pavement. The shooter stood over Angel Guadalupe, and shot him until he was not moving anymore. After, the shooter spotted a black coworker by the name of Reggie Woodson trying to run inside the warehouse, he shot him to death as well [...] The shooter planned everything out. Even the shirt he was wearing said "stupidity is not a crime." Diamond tried to plead insanity, and he even tried to check himself in a mental hospital about a week before as a cover up but they found nothing wrong with him [...] My uncle was a brave man, and the way he faced his killer in his last

moments shows me what kind of man he was. He went out like a man, like he wanted to, he went out like he said, just like Scarface.

I'm struck by a number of things about this essay. Of course, I am struck by the horror of the story, the racism and senselessness⁴¹, but I'm also struck by the vividness of detail, both remembered and imagined: the cleats on concrete, the dominoes game, the salsa music, the "stupidity is not a crime" t-shirt, Victor's description of his uncle's death as though he were there. In the previous chapter, I discussed the vivid memory for sensory information that those who have experienced trauma often possess, which we seem to be seeing here in Victor's writing, while at the same time, we see his difficulty constructing a linear narrative, also common with trauma, but what emerges from that difficulty is a sophisticated structure apt for the telling of this event: summer days in New Jersey, a particular summer day in New Jersey, an unexplained scream (that's my mother screaming,) a party with my uncle who "wants to go out like Scarface," news-like reporting of the murder of that uncle dying like Scarface, and later—a scene of Victor bringing food to his mother after school because for months she would not leave her bed. It does end wrapped in a bow, with a final pro-death penalty paragraph, arguing for the execution of his uncle's murderer, ("I believe that if criminals know they will be put to death before murdering someone else, they will hesitate to do the crime") but, otherwise, the jarring jump from scene to

⁴¹ When I asked the other students in the class what more they wanted to know about the essay—I was asking as a peer review question: "what could this writer add?" – the only thing any of them asked, and this, over and over, was "why did he want to kill all the black people?" When I responded that that was probably unknowable, they replied "but I still want to know. That's what I still want to know."

scene is both more heartbreaking and makes more emotional sense than a chronologically linear narrative might. It also makes a lot of sense that Victor had a tough time writing it. One feels that Victor may have been, to some extent, re-experiencing this during the writing. Whether or not he is, we have some visceral experience of the jarring feeling of time during trauma as we read.

Both of Victor's essays could be classified in some ways as stuplime writing, though in the first, we as writers have little to cling to (we have no real idea what he's doing there, who he's talking to, or why we're reading.) In the revised version, though, like some of the avant-garde stuplime, we can see the sense of the nonsense. That is: it's certainly chaotic, the way the essay jumps around in time, the way screams emerge from seemingly nowhere and then disappear into laughter and salsa music, which then disappears into gunfire, but isn't this the way violence *works*, especially in memory? In other words, a linear narrative wouldn't make sense here; chaos makes more sense. We are pulled back and forth between everyday details--the football field, family dinners--and abject horror--a man who wants to kill all the black employees, but decides a Puerto Rican man will "do," Victor's uncle reaching for the door handle. Horror doesn't come to us logically. And we are paralyzed by it, even by reading it. "As the temporalities of shock and boredom are inarguably antithetical," writes Ngai, "both are responses that confront us with the limitations of our capacity for responding in general" (261-2).

Victor doesn't follow a traditional essay structure because he can't. As Ngai points out (arguing *against* Jameson's concept of "coherence,") "what constitutes a legitimate form of

coherence here would seem to be the process of making parts fit or stick together in a *suitable or orderly way* implying logical consistency” (289) but what of a situation like a mad gunman shooting all the black people in a warehouse? What is logically consistent about that? Such a situation doesn’t lend itself to suitable, orderly structure—it lends itself to “heaps of fragments,” the disorganized organization of a subject “that has lost its capacity to organize past and future into coherent experience” not a cultural standard of order.

One of the main things to note about Victor’s essay—and the process by which he arrived at it, is that in this writing, we can see the strengths of the experience of trauma. While the apparent “failure” of the first draft may have been, in large part, my failure for setting up the assignment poorly, it may also have been because Victor had not yet found a place from which to begin. That place was, in fact, the movie *Scarface*, his uncle’s favorite movie. While he writes in more or less Standard Written English, Victor’s foothold from which he could engage non-traditional mastery came in the form of the jarring chronology of traumatic memory structure, in the vividness of sometimes unwanted details barreling in at inopportune moments. I want to reiterate how important it was for Victor to have the choice to write about this or not, if he decided not to, how important it was for him to find a small place of *calm* as a writer. I don’t take credit for Victor’s writing at all, but I do think the fact that I asked Victor why he had written the movie synopsis for his first draft instead of berating him for his strange decision and for not following the rules, played a large part in making him feel comfortable in taking this next step in piling more and more fragments onto that heap, “message fragments,” in cartoonist and

writer Lynda Barry's words, "we may not recognize until we have enough of them to understand. Liking and not liking," she goes on to say, "can make us blind to *what's there*" (12-13).

5.4 A NOTE ON THE TEACHER

So what is the role of the teacher in a classroom of radical rhetorical agency? In short: we find out what work students want language and writing to do in their lives and help them to reach those goals (within the constraints of the university) instead of prescribing those goals to the students. This means that the learning outcomes, the constraints, the definitions of "good writing" are decided together as a class, not top-down from the teacher. If students want to acquire specialist language, or if the class itself requires specialist language—as some courses in writing for the sciences or business and professional writing do—we help students acquire it, without losing track of the idea that language norms are not merely objects to be acquired and used, but also, as Lee reminds us, to be interrogated. The goal here, as Lee points out, is to "[decentralize] the instructor by not limiting students' language resources to those the instructor has prior competency in" and to "not position the instructor as the dominant interlocutor who solely determines what constitutes 'effective writing'" ("Beyond" 190).

With this in mind, grading in this pedagogy might take a number of forms⁴². Lee suggests, among other things, grading with a contract⁴³, though my students refused this suggestion outright, claiming they wouldn't take assignments seriously if they were being assessed on anything other than the content of their writing. Instead, we agreed upon portfolio grading—that is, students were graded on all drafts, but improvement was weighed much more heavily than first drafts. In other words, we left room for students to improve, and also *expected* students to improve. I let students know they could talk to me if they were ever confused about where they stood in the class or what they needed to do to improve their grades. For each essay, I gave suggestions for what I felt they needed to do to improve their papers, and for each essay the students also developed a sentence-level and a whole-paper-level goal that they needed to work on in their revisions, which I took into account in my grading. In-class workshop time was given to developing these goals. The aim here is that students leave the course able to experiment, identify audiences and find sites of mastery on their own.

“Language,” writes Baldwin, “is. . . a political instrument, means and proof of power. It is the most vivid and crucial key to identity: It reveals the private identity, and connects one with, or divorces one from, the larger, public, or communal identity” (“If Black English”). A pedagogy of radical rhetorical agency acknowledges these powers of language, not only affording students

⁴² For more information on assessment in a pedagogy that promotes student agency over language practices, see: “Beyond Translingual Writing” in *College English* by Jerry Won Lee.

⁴³ For more information on contract grading, see: “A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching” by Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow

the right to their own language, but also assuming that they know what kind of work they want language to do in their lives, how they want to communicate and who they want to communicate with. It asks students to build on language skills they already have to get to the places they want to go as writers. Mostly, it holds the perhaps idealistic belief that the world *is*, as Baldwin says, “larger, more daring, more beautiful and more terrible, but principally larger” than formal education would sometimes have us believe—and that this world belongs to the new generation of writers.

6.0 CONCLUSION: LINGERING

*All that hurries
will soon be done
but that which lingers
is what consecrates us*

*O, youth, don't waste
your courage on speed
or squander it in flight*

*Everything is at rest:
darkness and light
blossom and book.*

Sonnet 22 From the Sonnets to Orpheus,

Rainer Maria Rilke, Mark S. Burrows, trans.

In the introduction to this dissertation, I mention the journals I kept when I was a teenager. I had hundreds. I filled them with overheard conversations, fragmented memories, favorite turns of phrase. A friend of mine, years later, suggested that this might be because my memory had so many gaps—I had such a hard time putting things in order, so I wanted to keep a record, not only of my life, but of my thoughts. One way or another, I collected words. I often copied my favorite passages from one journal to another, changing them slightly until occasionally I felt they made a story or a poem worth sharing. These I typed up and occasionally showed to others.

In the writing of this dissertation, it's occurred to me that, despite the differences, there are some distinct similarities in the way I wrote *this* document and the way I wrote as a teenager. In my current process, I write down my thoughts on key terms or questions (“What happens when we demand attention?” “How does Van derKolk’s theory of mastery apply to literacy learning?” “Describe Cameron”) by hand, first by jotting down notes for three minutes and then by trying to write a few pages of somewhat coherent prose. Sometimes if I’m really stuck, I’ll draw a quick doodle of the scene: for example, a classroom of distracted students or Galton watching a lecture in the back of the room, to help myself think things through, to see what details I miss when I’m just writing down words. In order to integrate the ideas of published writers, I print up the quotes that interest me most from the books I’ve read, glue them onto notecards and shuffle the notecards, finally reorganizing them into piles. Then I name the piles,

writing a page or two about the logic that made me group them together. Once I have all of these parts, I begin the rough draft of the chapter, also by hand. Occasionally, if I feel a section needs a lot of extra work, I'll re-copy it into another notebook. Only after everything is written out longhand do I type the chapter up.

Both this process and my teen journal-writing were very personalized and very embodied. Things have changed, of course: the dissertation was a big, distinct goal with a small, distinct audience whereas my childhood journals were not a “project” at all, but a vague outlet with no real audience to speak of. I also have metacognitive awareness now—awareness of the multiple levels of writing processes—the tidy kind taught by the process-oriented in the academy (brainstorming, outlining, revising,) the messy kind alluded to by Ngai when she discusses stuplidity and linguistic heaps, and finally the even messier hyper-personal process of “paying attention,” which for me, involves the physical acts of writing by hand, of doodling, collecting and organizing. These acts soothe me and slow me down—which I need, otherwise, I have too many ideas and no connections between them. The literal ordering of notecards and excerpts from my notebooks helps me make sense of my thoughts, and helps me connect them to each other. And in this way, my difficulty concentrating has become a strength for me; it helps me draw surprising connections, often between disciplines, or between “professional” and unpublished writing.

Working this way borders on the ridiculous, but this is how I write. As I've mentioned before, I still need to find ways to organize the noisy (and yet, I hope, insightful) thoughts

zipping around in my brain, trying hard to make connections. I still often need to find my own sense of mastery. I'm not very different from my students in this way. I am different from my students, and from my younger writing self, as I mention above, in my metacognitive awareness of my need for calm and my knowledge of strategies for getting it, in my awareness of the *quirkiness* of bodies that write. That is, much traditional comp theory on writing process presupposes docile bodies, people who sit well in chairs and focus well on screens, who write clearly, calmly and obediently. My pedagogy does not suppose docility.

I bring up my own process here not because I think anyone else should follow it, but precisely because, while it uses some of Ngai's work on heaping and the stuplime, it is also tailor-made to my own attentional and physical needs and quirks. It is my way of making order of theories and facts that are hard for me to order; in my case, this process begins with collecting--my own site of mastery. And my pedagogy asks students to begin at a personalized site of mastery as well: not to look at the way that "meaning gets made" in some kind of giant tool and die machine, but to look at the ways that *they* make meaning—the ways they pay attention, what their bodies need when they write, however seemingly quirky.

There is no normal. There's no normal way of paying attention, no normal way of writing, reading or speaking. And *yet*, certain forms of these performances are valued academically over others. This dissertation calls these ideals into question. I argue here for the expansion of the language and attention structures valued in academia—because with that, we expand *who* is accepted in academia. We also, as academics, stand to learn a great deal ourselves.

In other words, my goal is not to invite my students into Burke's parlour, a room I imagine to be dark oak, filled with overstuffed chairs and serious, pipe-smoking men. My goal is to knock down a few parlour walls. There are students who don't want to go into this parlour—why would they, if their discourses aren't valued? We can't just tell students to join us in that dim room with its rarified air—the people in the parlour need to go out into the street and join new conversations too—on the football field, in the barber shop, on the street corner. There is just as much meaning in those places, just as much music.

This pedagogy isn't a project of liberation in which the professor rides in on her white horse and rescues the poor student, desperately in need of our help—a student who doesn't talk right or write right or pay attention right. It's not a pedagogy in which the professor utters the magic words to make that student sit as still and straight as Francis Galton's ideal attentive subject and talk and write like Ernest Hemmingway. This *is* a project that argues that, just as literacy is a transaction between text and reader, so is learning a transaction between teacher and student-- that just as we ask our students to learn from us, we can--and should--learn about language and literacy from our students. And we can learn by studying what these students are paying attention to when they're supposedly "not paying attention," by looking at what status quo a noise is trying to disrupt and with, by asking students what audience they want to invoke and by reading, not just with generosity, but with curiosity.

To this end, following in the tradition of University of Pittsburgh Composition and other comp pedagogy, especially in Basic Writing, I want to encourage the reframing of deficit, in this

case in terms of attention, by rethinking the ways we perceive supposed failures of attention like the boredoms, noise and distraction in order that we might expand the ways that we teach and read. It's my hope, as I said in the introduction, that this dissertation will serve as a praxis of opening, one that will allow professors to linger a while longer with writing or even behavior that seems disordered, noisy or stuplime, so that we can work with the heaps, the beginnings, the sites where the student is making their own kind of order—an order which we might not initially recognize.

6.1 AND AGAIN, BOREDOM

When I was a teenager, during the same time I kept my countless notebooks, I used to sit, every day after school, in front of the heater blasting as hot as I could get it (I was always cold) staring at the striped carpet or looking longingly at the dog who usually sat just out of arm's reach. It always smelled like burning dust. I could only write late at night after I was sure everyone else was asleep, so during the day I waited. I would sit there for hours at a time and try my best not to think about anything at all. This went on for years, literally years, but it registers in my memory as just one endless day. I was bored. It was boring. I have never been so bored in my life. I sat doing nothing, forcing myself to think about nothing.

That's hard for me to write about, harder maybe than the actual trauma. But I write it because, as stale and dusty (and yet, burning) as that time was, I think it was the beginning of

this dissertation—and I think there’s a clue there. I’ve thought about this kind of boredom for years, long before I was any kind of academic, thought about it, not as an emptiness, but as a type of waiting: an agony and an incubation. I wondered for years how boredom could be so painful, why I hated being bored (and why other people often do too) more than almost any other feeling. And so this endless scene is the site where this investigation began. Boredom, I’ve known personally for my whole life, is not an apathetic feeling. It is full of tension—and that means it’s full of energy.

And that’s how the boredoms function throughout this dissertation, I think, as surprising sites of incubation: Galton’s ridiculous “experiment” makes me wonder about noise, Ngai’s work on the *stuplime* makes me wonder about when we do and don’t accept frantic and disordered language, and Ray’s inability to concentrate on a “little piece of paper” makes me wonder how attention is distributed. In the final chapter, I let boredom go for poetry and mastery, but boredom (or my fascination and hatred of it) gave birth to that pedagogy.

The point I want to make is not exactly about boredom but about beginnings: Even if we are stuck somewhere, and even if it is for a long, long while, no one can stop plants growing up from the mud we’re stuck in. And when movement starts, however slowly, we’re not stuck anymore; so begins “the blossom and the book” that Rilke discusses in his sonnet. Throughout this dissertation, we see various examples of students seeming stuck: in their writing, in their personal lives, in their behavior—and it’s hard to know if that’s where the situation is going to end: am I just going to read the synopsis of *Scarface*? Will this class just giggle and text on their

phones? And then we see it turn to a lyric essay. And then they write about home. Something new buds just when you least expect it—and it was the “stasis and anguish” itself, Bellow’s definition of boredom, that got us to that new place.

Think about Victor, paralyzed with stasis and anguish before he turned in the revision to his Scarface essay (if you’ll recall, he was going to switch topics, he had no idea what to write, he even missed a class,) but just at the eleventh hour, the dam broke. It broke because he lingered. If we had sat down with a template for writing, if we had switched to a more palatable topic, if I had tried to get him to “make more sense” right away with his Scarface essay, I’m sure he would’ve written something that was just fine, and probably forgettable. Lingering with chaos and boredom and the mediocre writing of first drafts allowed Victor to find the story of his uncle and the structure of the final essay: fragmented and wild--and right. And *my* lingering with the Scarface essay let Phil see that it was okay for him to fail, that sometimes in a supposed failure, you find that one seed, that one beginning.

And consider Marshall, who lingered on the one word, *bih*, that reminded him most of home—a thorny word, but one embedded with multiple meanings. And when he stuck with that word for a while, Marshall started to reflect not just on the word, but on how language itself circulates and how that circulation relates to culture. He became somewhat obsessed with how the language of “outsider” groups, like young black men speaking very specific regional forms of deep Southern slang, becomes idolized and co-opted by mainstream white society. Until then, Marshall had been going through the motions of essay writing, half-heartedly trying on language

he didn't want to use, sometimes coherently, sometimes incoherently, but almost never with anything to say. When he lingered with one three-letter word, his own language, his own ideas, came out. And if those who are unfamiliar with Marshall's use of language linger long enough to learn to read it, we can learn a lot about discourse, both in content and in the language itself.

Aya, who wrote about *Bartleby* and Thoreau—I wish I'd asked her to linger longer. I wish, instead of trying to find the perfect spot for her to try to focus, or to try to get her to “make sense,” I had encouraged her to write more without asking her to neaten it up. The tactic I suggested, as I recall, was one someone taught me in high school that has never once worked for me: I suggested she take a good idea (the clog in the machine, probably) and come up with other good ideas to tack to it. I wish, instead, I'd asked her to try a method like mine for this dissertation. I would like to have asked her more questions, a lot of them: Why did she like Thoreau? When did she read him? Why did his writing stick with her? What machines did she feel like she clogs? What machines would she *like* to clog? What did she think was the most interesting line in *Bartleby*? Why? If she had all of these things—and other ideas of her own--written down, even as little scraps, my guess is some sort of order would have emerged. Instead, I hurried her along, and I think we missed out on an opportunity for those ideas to take form.

And noise—I didn't want to linger with noise, but I didn't have much of a choice, aside from ruling with an iron fist or walking out of the classroom, but it was that noisy class and that “failed” cell phone experiment that really set me to thinking about the culture and social structure of attention. I started to see noise not as something students do to “act out” or irritate

the teacher (though sometimes this might be the case,) but in the form of listening to music or writing texts, or even dopamine-seeking, I began to recognize noise as largely a longing for community—which sometimes a class can provide, but not always. I had thought about the economics of attention before—for a long time, actually, but it was when I was stuck in utter frustration that I stopped long enough to look at what was happening with the attention in this one particular class. It was in lingering that I learned the students were group texting *each other*, that some of them needed to listen to music at top volume to write, that some of them found reading physically agitating, that they wanted to write poetry. These insights inspired me to look deeply at the social factors affecting the economics of attention—without ever losing sight of the individuals involved.

This dissertation was borne of those long silent days in front of the heater and those noisy, sometimes frustrated afternoons in the African Heritage Room. It would've been so easy to see those moments, or dozens more throughout this dissertation, as failures—right before they opened into blossom or book. “Don’t waste your courage on speed,” writes Rilke, “or squander it in flight.” If one stops too early, the thing will not bloom. So I hope this dissertation helps us look differently—and stay a little longer in the mud.

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