

**The Thread that Makes the Cloth:**

**Narrative as the Fabric of our Teaching Selves**

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THESIS

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## **SUMMARY**

This dissertation reports on a research study aimed at describing how writing teacher identity narratives are constructed, how such narratives become entrenched or revised after teachers engage in analysis of their own narratives, and how teacher preparation programs might better help pre-service writing teachers through the teacher identity development process. I performed narrative analysis on the coursework of 27 pre-service teachers and did regular follow-up interviews with five research participants representative of a range of backgrounds and experiences. Of those five, two were chosen for case study and are the focus of the dissertation.

Findings include the interconnectedness of identity and language; the interdependence of writing and writing teacher identity construction, as well as the interdependence of teaching writing pedagogy and writing teacher identity construction; the collaborative nature of learning experiences; and the potential for teacher-writing to build, over time, teachers' professional advocacy.

The narrative text of our teaching lives invites us to make meaning from it.

—Ruth Vinz, *Composing a Teaching Life*

## INTRODUCTION

(Parts of this chapter were previously published as Sjostrom, K. & McCoyne, J. (2017).

Partnership literacies: Storying our selves. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 61(3), 331-334. Excerpts from this source were written solely by the first author.)

When I was in my seventh year of teaching high school English, I got the idea that I needed out. Now, I cannot recall the exact genesis of the idea, though I imagine it had much to do with my young daughter becoming ever more aware of my absence in her life—or, rather, with *my* becoming ever more aware of my absence in her life. For nine and a half months of the year, teaching English was well more than a full time job. In the winter months, it meant not seeing my daughter in daylight; to be at school by the 7:45 a.m. start time, I often left before she woke, and sneaking in just one hour of work after school meant at best a 5:00 p.m. daycare pick-up which, in the northern mid-west, meant fetching her under a blanket of already blue-black sky. I realize this is normal for most working mothers—if only I didn’t begin working again as soon as my daughter was in bed at 8:00 p.m., then spend all of Sunday trapped behind a tower of essays at a local library or coffee shop or—anywhere but near my daughter and husband. My husband. You can bet that the few non-working hours I spent at home did not belong to him. He, too, was on my mind as I started imagining a new daily life for myself.

When I tried to explain to people the life I was after, I talked about my daughter and husband. I talked about air and light. I talked about writing. I had been writing a bit more in recent years—poems, creative non-fiction, essays on teaching writing—and even published a

few pieces, but that didn't seem to matter to my school's administration. I wanted it to matter. I wanted to be a writer *and* a teacher *and* a mother *and* a wife.

I didn't resign on a whim, and I took seriously my mentor's warning that he (who had happily taught into his 60's) almost quit in his seventh year for similar reasons. I debated my options for months, even spending two weeks on the couch, post-gall bladder surgery, making pros and cons lists for staying on the job. Pros: I worked in a reputable district, had dream assignments (Creative Writing, A.P., literary magazine advisor), made good money, loved teaching. Cons: I was not being the wife, mother, or writer I wanted to be, and I didn't know how to be them *and* do my job well. Also, I was feeling more and more that, even when I was officially doing my job well, I wasn't always being the writing teacher I wanted to be, and I certainly had no extra time to fight for new policies and curricula.

And then I and my A.P. students read *Catch-22* and when, four hundred and nine pages into the novel, Yossarian realizes that the statute "Catch-22 did not exist," it was as if I was reading the novel for the first time. It wasn't that I'd forgotten what a farce the damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don't military rule was. Rather, Yossarian's realization that there could be options beyond the tangled ones often presented in a catch-22 challenged me to see my dilemma with new eyes. Late in the book, Yossarian confronts his feckless superiors, saying he doesn't "buy" what they tell him; he doesn't buy that he's either "*for*" them or "against [his] country" and that "it's as simple as that." But it's not until Yossarian hears that Orr, his presumed-dead, former tent-mate, has rowed to Sweden (no doubt via a brilliant plan long in the making) that he has the courage and imagination to craft his way out of the war's madness and to rewrite the story of his escape as "not [a] running *away* from [his] responsibilities" but as a "running *to* them."

When I told my A.P. students, seniors, that I would not be returning to the high school in the fall either, I invoked Orr and Yossarian, telling my students I had been inspired by the characters and was working to craft a life for myself beyond the options I had thought I had. Finally, I told them, here was proof of what their English teachers had been telling them for years: a story can change the course of a life.

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It is probably not a coincidence that around the time I started thinking of jumping ship I became obsessed with Jerome Bruner's 1987 article, "Life as Narrative." In it, Bruner suggested that "we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives," for he was coming to believe that "the ways of telling and the ways of conceptualizing that go with them become so habitual that they finally become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future." In other words, he proposes that the narratives we have decided on as being our life stories become prescriptive, determining what we remember, what we notice, what we do.

In part, I was taken by Bruner's willingness to be vulnerable. He admitted that he was "try[ing] out an idea that might not be ready" (indeed, he refined this idea in his later work), and though such an admission was relatively easy for a heavy-hitter like him, it was so empty of the academic swagger to which I had become accustomed that I immediately warmed to him and to the possibility that there might be a way of being an academic that I had yet to imagine. Regardless of *how* he presented his thesis, however, I don't think I could have gotten it out of my mind. Bruner was suggesting that even if I *could* imagine an alternate life story, the way I had come to perceive and order experience—my narrative—would likely "persist stubbornly in spite

of changed conditions.” Could it be that the “cultural conventions” and “canonical stances and circumstances” from which I had drawn to write my story were that powerful?

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Teacher educators would like their students to think that there are many more teacher identity scripts from which to choose than they might imagine. Indeed, both Smagorinsky and Whiting’s (1995) and Brass and Webb’s (2014) surveys of the field reveal English educators to be determined to help novice teachers resist the pull of what Lortie (1975) called their “apprenticeship[s] of observation”—all those years they were students, taking in what it means to be a teacher—as well as the pull of “institutional and cultural ideologies” (Ritchie and Wilson, 2000, p. 15). That is, teacher educators often seek to help their charges recognize and revise the narratives from which they operate, especially when those narratives do not match tested or professed pedagogies, or when those narratives do not accommodate other aspects of their selves (Alsup, 2005; Sjostrom and McCoyne, 2017).

But how easy is that revision? The bounty of books offering strategies to teacher educators suggests not very, their authors each painting some variation of the pre-service teacher who is intellectually *unconvinced* by what Freire called the banking method of education but still emotionally convinced by his high school British literature teacher who dispensed coins of wisdom from his lecturer's podium. Further frustrating teacher educators is the current state of education, including teacher preparation, which severely limits a teacher’s identity to that of a technocrat trying to efficiently give students the skills and credentials they need to make money and to do this in an individualistic and competitive way that is consistent with market logic (Sjostrom and McCoyne, 2017).



The discourse of market competition is not a new one in the field of education, though it is certainly more present than ever. In 1955, Rudolph Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read—And What You Can Do About It* ignited anxiety over America's international competitiveness, connecting that competitiveness to the quality of the nation's primary education, and Russia's 1957 launch of Sputnik was all the fuel that anxiety needed for a steady burn. Perhaps most inflammatory, however, was the Reagan-era report *A Nation at Risk* (1983). Though since acknowledged to be the product of manipulated and even invented statistics, *A Nation at Risk* was the impetus for myriad further studies, reports, and education initiatives aimed at improving the economic value of teachers' and students' work (Alsup, 2005, p. 22).

Notably, *A Nation at Risk* made its appearance just as neoliberal economic policies were taking their place on the national stage. Replacing Keynesian models that relied on the government to correct for capitalism's perceived instability, neoliberal policies reflected growing faith in free markets (Stedman Jones, 2014). So absolute has this faith become—even despite the economic crisis of 2008—that the neoliberal project has “naturalize[d] market forms, processes, and ways of thinking as the only way to organize society” (Leitner, Peck, & Sheppard, 2007, summarized in Lipman, 2011). Indeed, so pervasive is neoliberal discourse that it seems only logical to think of even education in terms of “‘efficiency’ and ‘effectiveness’ thereby excluding discussions of values, philosophy, and social interests” (Lipman, 2011, pp. 11-12). While *Why Johnny Can't Read—And What You Can Do About It* initiated debates, conversations about what counts in education are now getting more and more limited. Lipman (2011), drawing on both Ball (2001) and Woods & Jeffrey (2002), outlines the insidiousness of neoliberal discourse in education: market-driven policies have so reformed schools as to produce a “‘commercial civilization’ and... a new meaning of being a teacher or student...that is grounded in a coercive

and market-oriented culture” (p. 11). Put simply, neoliberal education reforms have rewritten the narrative of which subjectivities are available in classrooms and which products have value (Sjostrom and McCoyne, 2017).

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When I first met John, then an undergraduate in my Teaching of Writing methods course, he was already familiar with terms I was just learning as an English education doctoral student, terms like neoliberalism and positionality. As a sociology minor, he had been primed to think about the impact of social and economic policies on students, standards, and schools. Yet, like most of my students, John is a product of No Child Left Behind, and thus his apprenticeship of observation and his field experiences had mostly served to reinforce a certain way of being—and being a teacher—in schools, one that did little to directly address the social and economic issues troubling him (DiPardo, 2012; Sjostrom and McCoyne, 2017).

With Bruner in the back of my mind, I hoped to disrupt John’s and other students’ narratives about schooling by putting a new spin on the literacy autobiography that has proven a hallmark of English education courses (Smagorinsky and Whiting, 1995). Drawing inspiration from Paul Auster’s “Why Write?” and Naomi Shihab Nye’s “Three Pokes of a Thistle,” I designed the assignment as a creative non-fiction, segmented essay with each section featuring a significant moment in the student’s history as a writer and/or reader. I also had in the back of my mind a year’s worth of reading on teacher identity. I had come to understand that identity, once considered foundational and fixed, is now widely conceived of as constructed narrative (Bruner, 1990), with each individual the site of competing narratives, among which there are “gaps, contradictions, and tensions” (Ritchie and Wilson, 2000, p. 88). And I had come to believe that

to help a teacher "interven[e] in and contest" narratives, then, is to help him become aware of his teacher identity as a construction such that he can have a more conscious hand in that construction, committing to what he wants to commit so he might act on that commitment (Ritchie and Wilson, 2000, p. 14, 172). Through the narrative collage format and post-writing reflection prompts, I sought to bring to the forefront these competing narratives, rather than encourage the pre-service teachers before me to tell *the* story of their reading and writing pasts. Put another way, I tried to provide an opportunity for my students to resist a simplifying through-line and, instead, linger in and study the many narratives they may carry with them (Sjostrom and McCoyne, 2017).

But writing his literacy autobiography in an unconventional form did not seem to have much of an effect on John's story of who he would or should be as a teacher. Before writing the segmented essay, John wrote a letter to his future teacher-self, focusing chiefly on his "love of literature" and critical reading. After writing it, John reflected that the essay revealed that he was "going into English education more so for [his] love of literature than [his] love of writing," citing the fact that his "literacy autobiography certainly has more moments pertaining to reading than writing." *And yet*, when the essay's segments are tallied, there turns out to be an equal emphasis on reading and writing, with the essay's title, "Live, Love, Say It Well in Good Sentences," tipping the balance in writing's favor—not to mention that the sections on writing all but drip with desperate desire to be a great writer, each a carefully crafted submission for that title (Sjostrom and McCoyne, 2017).

To be fair, John recognized that his piece served as a reminder of "why [he] used to love writing as well as the [skills] he possesses," but it is as if his storyline of who he should be as a teacher had no room for this passion. And why would it? John's literacy autobiography begins,

“I haven’t written much since I was little.” John has, of course, written plenty, but the products sanctioned by his schools do not seem to count as real writing to him. One section of John’s literacy history suggests how he, an avid writer in childhood, came in his adolescence to rationalize writing as only a sometime thing: it is the work of an “artist” with “darkness in their soul,” and the “weigh[t]” of the “enterprise” makes it “only possible to be an artist for short periods of time.” Still, in another section depicting the present, he admits he is “constantly imagining things to write,” though frequently “crippled” by anxiety at the keyboard and always sure his ideas are “not really literary though” (Sjostrom and McCoyne, 2017).

During the literacy autobiography unit, John experienced a writing workshop for the first time, and it was a revelation. Up until that point, he had “never truly revised [his] work before,” “did not expect to enjoy revising [his] work,” nor had he ever “participated in a group like this.” He was deeply proud of his writing and claimed: “This pride was new for me, and I realized that it came from doing writing that was engaging and personal, as well as creative.” From reading widely on writing teacher education, I knew that even this compelling of an experience could have little effect on John’s practice as a writing teacher. For example, even if a teacher uses a process-based approach in his own writing, he may not choose to use such an approach in the classroom if it does not align with other beliefs he has about teaching and learning. And even if a teacher attempts to employ a process-based pedagogy, it will likely fall flat if it does not correspond with other of the teacher’s beliefs (Robbins, 1996). Indeed, John’s pride did not carry over even into his post-writing reflection where he claimed to not be “confident” in writing or especially motivated by his love of it. Having never been invited, since early childhood, to write consistently, creatively, or with others—nor to conceive of academic writing as personal or

creative, John defaulted to his narrative of real writing as the work of genius artists. And, surely, the average classroom was not made for, or up of, genius artists (Sjostrom and McCoyne, 2017).

And yet, after all the drafts and reflections, when John and I looked at his literacy autobiography together—when we gave each section its due, when we lingered on the title—John could not deny that he loved to write, was getting ever better at it, and wanted a greater place for it in his life and classroom. The segmented essay I had asked my students to write did not, in and of itself, release the chain of a binding narrative, but, to those who looked closely, it revealed the cracks in that chain.

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When teachers' writing histories are considered in the literature on English teacher education and professional development, they are often examined to test the hypothesis that writing teachers, to be most effective, should be writers themselves. While some researchers conclude there is no direct correlation between teachers' writing histories and their effectiveness in the writing classroom (Brooks, 2007; Robbins, 2009), many have found clear benefits to being a teacher-writer, benefits from improved writing dispositions—important because teachers have been proven to pass on their writing attitudes—to increased content knowledge (Bentley, 2013; Certo, Appol, Wibbens, and Hawkins, 2012; Daisey 2009). Also documented, and especially interesting to me, is the impact teacher-writing can have on the quality of teacher reflection. Indeed, teachers who engage in narrative or reflective writing—and especially those who engage in collaborative talk about this writing—are more likely to assume evolving identities based on critical reflection of their practices and commitments than to have identities imposed on them by neoliberal discourses and their attendant emphases on formulaic argumentative writing and

standardized assessment (Cremin and Baker, 2010; Whitney, 2008). As I planned the Teaching of Writing methods course, I tried to keep in mind that teachers who are not allowed to develop these writing habits will be unlikely to continue or model these practices or to reap the benefits for themselves or their students when they enter classrooms of their own. In other words, pre-service teachers unused to continually harnessing the power of writing to consider their stances and commitments may remain unnecessarily stagnant, and they may invite their students to swim in stagnant classroom waters as a result.

When, during my reading on teacher-writing, I came across Bentley's (2013) study examining pre-service teachers' pedagogical content knowledge, I thought of John as Bentley described her finding that "nearly all" of her English methods students "expressed feeling 'frustrated' or 'having anxiety' when asked to describe 'how they felt as writers' (p. 227). I was heartened by Bentley's account of how, when she engaged them in Fleischer and Andrew-Vaughan's (2006, 2009) Unfamiliar Genre Project, the pre-service teachers developed "confidence in analyzing, composing, and teaching" genres "previously feared" (p. 233). Through the project, Bentley's students got to write a lot and to imagine how they might confidently engage their future students in more and varied writing.

Though I wondered if the pre-service teachers' enthusiasm, confidence, and commitments would translate to new contexts, if they would *last*, I got my hands on Fleischer and Andrew-Vaughan's book and reserved three weeks in my Teaching of Writing methods course for the Unfamiliar Genre Project. I might even have patted myself on the back, for I was about to be more the teacher of writing that I'd wanted to be back when I was instead handing my high school students prescriptive writing packets to help them get their essays done "right" and on time. *This* time, I was not starting with form but was making time for students to read

widely to *find* form. I was making time for students to create their own genre how-to guides, try their hands at genres of their choice, revise, reflect on their processes, share. And I was hoping that in taking Bentley's lead and not privileging any specific pedagogical approaches I was helping my students to craft teacher identities beyond the options they thought they had.

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It was during the Unfamiliar Genre Project that John first tried his hand at dystopian short fiction and told the story of Daisy, a former high school English teacher in a not-so-distant future—a future when curriculum is driven by the newly-elected and hyper-nationalistic Allegiance government. Frightened by threats of terrorism and an Ebola-like potential pandemic, most Americans are stepping in line behind the Allegiance. Daisy works for the new government—in its Department of Media Distribution—not because she favors it (How could she support those responsible for the disappearance of her Indian-American boyfriend?) but because she cannot bring herself to continue teaching when the books she loved—books like *The Awakening*—are no longer allowed, when teachers are told not just to emphasize American achievement (as they had been in the Time Before) but to “teach against fact and history” to further glorify the United States. So foreign and faulty is this new world that Daisy flirts with an Anna Karenina-like end before instead committing to oblivion:

How easy it would be to fall forward [in front of the oncoming train]. How easy it would be to annihilate herself, to explode into a cloud of dust and stars, or more accurately flesh and bone. And she a smiling woman, only thirty. Something stopped Daisy as she stepped to the phosphorous yellow line, warning passengers not to step further. It was not fear that held her back, but rather a sudden

realization of the pointlessness of it all. No, Daisy gave up. Easier to perform a lobotomy on her mind, to clear it of the fire, the gold, the joy.

...The only ones she saw who were managing were the ones who discarded their lives and identities. She too must let the past wither and fall away like petals from a garden flower as winter approaches.

The train stopped before Daisy. Passengers poured out when the doors opened, and only after a moment's wait could Daisy get on. The steps that moved her lifeless body onto the train were small, but each one brought her away from where she was before.

Daisy is not afraid to kill herself; rather, her life has become too “automatized,” as John writes earlier in the story, for her to muster that act of rebellion. She has learned to pass as a cog in the Allegiance machine, and any remnant of her former self—even a face pale from the pain of remembering her lost love, Dev—is a liability. Indeed, it is thoughts of Dev and of a favorite former student intoxicated by the power of language that have brought Daisy, the Department of Media Distribution worker, to the precipice. Better to clear the heart, to go through the motions. Better to join those who “discarded their lives and identities.”

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When I interviewed John about his Unfamiliar Genre Project, for my research study on writing teacher identity development, he reminded me that dystopian literature is scary because the depicted society has enough in common with our own to make its dark future a possibility. To be



sure, the terrorism, contagious disease, and threats of deportation that feature in John's story were all too familiar when he penned it. Also familiar was, and is, America's emphasis on individualistic competition. Though it is hard to imagine a time when America's citizens must stay on official script, there is something in Daisy's interchange with a Department of Social Wellbeing official that feels a bit familiar: "Prosperity to the individual," Daisy must say to the passing man. "By the will of God," he replies.

From this interchange, we get the sense that Daisy will never be free of Allegiance surveillance—that though Daisy decides to leave teaching rather than have her autonomy compromised, autonomy will be hard to achieve anywhere given the Allegiance's high level of oversight. Again, though it is hard to imagine the potential reality of such an extreme, heightened surveillance is another of those aspects of the depicted society that has enough in common with our own to give pause. Further cause for unease is Holloway-Libell and Brass' recent (2017) article in which they suggest that the neoliberal education policies of the last fifteen years amount to a "gaze" as "constant" as the Brotherhood's and have resulted in a "paradigmatic shift in the construction of teachers'... subjectivity" (p. 4). Put plainly, the authors contend that teachers' internal realities have actually been transformed, their former identities "discarded" like Daisy's.

After comparing teacher interviews that coincided with the implementation of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and those concurrent with Race to the Top (RTTT), Holloway-Libell and Brass determined that the increase in accountability mechanisms (including the addition of value-added measures) in the intervening decade effectively "fabricat[ed] a new kind of teacher" (p. 33):

While teachers of the first accountability stage positioned NCLB's

(self-)disciplinary mechanisms as external intrusions on their autonomy, professionalism, and practice, the second group positioned RTTT's accountability mechanisms as the very modes by which they knew themselves and their quality. (p. 4)

To illustrate: whereas teachers in the earlier study complained that NCLB expected them to “Produce. Produce a test score. Produce on the AP exam. Produce diplomas” despite their conviction that standardized tests were not “any measure, whatsoever, of what [students] learned,” teachers in the later study questioned neither the drive to production nor the assessment of that production. As one teacher said, “all you have is what you produce, and you have to produce the best product that you can, which is who can perform on a test” (20). In this way, there has been a “normalization of the marketized teacher [and] the managed teacher” (p. 4), as well as what Holloway-Libell and Brass call a “collapse” between the “governed” (teachers) and the mechanisms of governance. The “accountability apparatus” is no longer external; one is a score determined by constant surveillance (Foucault, 1977).

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Even scarier than a dystopia's similarity to our own world, John claimed when I first interviewed him, is that “when you're in a dystopian society, you don't really know that it's a dystopian society.” He continued: “And I think that that's true in America right *now* where there're these big social issues that are so critical and people are just like, ‘Life here is fine. We're so much better off than everybody else.’” And so, from the very first draft of his dystopian short fiction, John tried to capture what he views as America's solipsism by describing a “public school

system [that] had always emphasized American achievement” and was now being reformed “to glorify the United States even further.”

And from our very first discussion of John’s fiction, John and I have had to struggle to see the dystopia to which we are blind. So much easier to climb onto high horses from which to denounce “prosperity to the individual” as the implicit neoliberal message of our own society and then call it a day. But are there ways our lives have become so “automatized” that we do not detect how each step, though small like the steps Daisy took toward the train, is bringing us “away from where [we] were before”? What petals of our pasts—be they our love of writing or our commitments to teaching in a certain vein—are we, too, letting whither away in the face of authoritative discourses, ones that can be so pervasive as to be invisible (Bakhtin, 1982)?

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When John revisited Daisy, the protagonist of his short story, a year later, to write a novella for his Senior Honors Thesis for which I was his advisor, her story was decidedly different. In this telling, Daisy reconnects with her favorite former student (now a writer for a resistance rag) and slowly awakens from her Allegiance-induced stupor. This Daisy had been placed back in the classroom, after being reprogrammed to teach in accordance with the new “Eagle Standards,” and though she—like the version of her in the short story—tries to stick to the Allegiance script for the sake of sanity and self-preservation, she eventually replaces pieces of the canned curriculum with better practice: she learns students’ names, she places their desks in a semi-circle, she invites them to speak. Most dangerous: she introduces the Allegiance’s pamphlets as literature for critique and is on the hunt for hidden copies of *The Awakening*.

In “Life as Narrative,” Bruner invokes the anthropologist Victor Turner’s (1982) application of Kenneth Burke’s *The Grammar of Motives* (1945) to outline how drama is constructed “in life as in literature”: “an initial canonical state is breached, redress is attempted which, if it fails, leads to crisis; crisis, if unresolved, leads eventually to a new legitimate order” (p. 697). A “cultural cris[i]s”—or “trouble”—is avoided or resolved when the life story “mesh[es]...within a community of life stories” (p. 697, 699). For example, in her initial incarnation, Daisy revises her life story to match the Allegiance’s narrative. In the next version, however, Daisy cannot resolve herself to the Allegiance’s ways; she joins forces with the resistance to help form a new legitimate order. But can this new order be firmly established, or will there always be trouble?

John spent another year tinkering with Daisy’s story, during which time he also stepped more firmly into the classroom, first for a 60-hour internship and then for the student teaching practicum. The details of John’s classroom experiences showed up, unabashedly, in Daisy’s; their stories were becoming intertwined. It was as if John, too, had experienced a cultural crisis and was attempting to resolve it through his story. Though as of this writing the novella is still in progress, there is little doubt: Daisy will not “discard [her] li[fe] and identit[y].” But will she or her teaching practices survive? Will she find Dev? At this point, John is wary of an ending that is “too nice”; it is *dystopian* fiction after all. Still, John is more able to imagine—and finds it more important to imagine—resistance to education standardization and reform than he was a year before, when he had Daisy leave the classroom and “let the past wither and fall away like petals from a garden flower as winter approaches.”

Steeped in the literature on teacher identity development as I have been, I cannot help but wonder at the extent to which John has indeed revised his teacher identity narratives. Have my

English Education interventions hit their marks? If so, have I created a teacher identity for myself with which I can more contentedly live?

The answers to these and related questions (What breached John's—and my—accepted narratives? When and how was the resultant trouble resolved? When and why was it unresolvable? Which factors enabled the establishing of new identity narratives?) are not easy. In fact, every time I do come up with what at first appear clear answers, I realize I am not accounting for some of the “gaps, contradictions, and tensions” inherent in identity narratives (Ritchie and Wilson, 2000, p. 88) or am so eager to claim one of my interventions as causal that I deny the complexity of identity development. Ultimately, in an effort to explore and illustrate the nature of this development, I have breached the canonical state of academic writing. In what follows, I try to do as I have encouraged my students to do: to resist a simplifying through-line and, instead, linger in and study the many narratives I and they carry. In doing so, I try to practice narrative inquiry in its purest form. I tell stories, and more stories, about John and another student, Sameea. I also tell stories about myself, for my and my students' stories have inevitably become knitted together. If there is a moral to these stories, it is, as Tim O'Brien says in *The Things They Carried*, “like the thread that makes the cloth. You can't tease it out. You can't extract the meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning.” And yet, meaning is made—in the writing and the reading.

**A note on the research study from which the following stories are drawn:**

Both John and Sameea are participants in my research study on writing teacher identity development. I invited all students in my English education courses to participate, and almost all accepted the invitation, agreeing to allow me to retain copies of the teacher identity narratives they wrote for my courses, as well as to contact them for follow-up conversations. Over time, I identified John and Sameea as focal participants because of their particularly strong commitments, their interest in the questions of how teachers retain and repair their commitments, and their particularly strong and interesting writing given these questions. Because of the quality of their writing and because some of the following stories are theirs, after all, I have included John's and Sameea's words wherever possible and have invited them to review the manuscript at many stages.

I have been exceedingly fortunate that both John and Sameea have been eager participants for all of the almost three years my study has been in progress. Together, we have used narrative to explore and compose our teaching selves, and in the essays that follow I seek to capture that process. The essays are divided into two sections, with the first focusing on Sameea and me and the second on John and me.

**PART ONE**

**SAMEEA**

## I.

The narrative itself is a form of interpretation, analyzing, and finding meaning, and. . . it becomes the first step in locating the tensions and unspoken silences in once's life.

—Joy S. Ritchie and David E. Wilson, *Teacher Narrative as Critical Inquiry:  
Rewriting the Script*

On a Chicago summer night when Tom McNamee was 20 years old, he floated down Michigan Avenue with a girl who was not quite his girl. But that evening, he thought she was his, and the Magnificent Mile sparkled as they made their way from Gino's East south towards the river and talked about the future. Tom was floating through *life*, he told the girl, unsure of what to major in, unsure of what he wanted to do after college. People had told him he was a good writer, but what could he do with that? He wanted to charge into the world, but how?

A taxi horn blared as if to urge Tom on, and Tom, energized, veered across a plaza toward the grand stone of the Wrigley Building which was all lit up, shining against the purple-black sky like Oz. The girl followed, confused by the change in course, and caught up to Tom just as he turned around to face her. Framed by a golden doorway, Tom gestured behind him, speaking more softly but even more urgently. "Maybe I could work for a newspaper. If I was a journalist, I could go up to that guy and ask him how he got here. I could ask him anything I want to know."

As he stood there, shielding the girl who wasn't really his girl from the mysterious bum sleeping in the golden doorway, Tom realized how much he wanted to know. And he started to think of journalism as a way to find out, as a conscious choice to be part of the world. His eyes



looked from the girl to the Michigan Avenue bridge, then followed the river's path to the vast blank canvas of lake and the broad sky above.

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Sameea talks to strangers and thinks more people should. She's not a journalist. She's her mother's daughter. Both women "make conversation with random people." Though Sameea suspects many would consider their behavior "weird," she finds the "exchange" of words between strangers "a beautiful thing," insisting that the people to whom she talks are "not *strangers*; they're human beings with stories and thoughts."

Sameea chose high school English teaching as a career in part because in a classroom she is *supposed* to talk to and listen to people she wouldn't otherwise know: "As much as I would like to walk up to every other person down the road and talk to them, there's only so much I can do that in normal life, because people have other things going on. When I'm in a classroom, though, and I'm teaching, that is accepted. That's why they're there. They're there to listen and *I'm* there to listen." Because Sameea can "present and listen in a way that everyday existing limits," she feels "*more* like herself" when she's teaching.

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I am thinking of Sameea, my English Education student, as Tom McNamee tells his story of a long-ago night on Michigan Avenue to a group of middle-schoolers at the Illinois Writing Project's Writing Palooza. I imagine her across the street from Tom and his almost-girl, sitting on the edge of a planter in Pioneer Court, in front of the Equitable Building—only it's day-bright and decades later, and she's talking to an elderly man about his granddaughter, the girl racing

from them toward a seagull scavenging commuters' dropped crumbs. Both Sameea and Tom are out in the wide world.

Of course, right now, Sameea is probably doing homework and Tom is here, speaking as Editorial Page Editor of the Chicago Sun-Times to aspiring adolescent writers. He is trying to distinguish between the kind of writing the kids will do in his session—journalistic writing that reaches outward—and more personal writing. I am keenly aware that the “inward” writing he describes is all I ever do if I ever do write, but I comfort myself that I am here, if only as an observer. I am here: forcing myself to reach outward, trying on ways to charge into the world as a writer and writer educator. When Tom is done presenting, I make myself go up to him and talk.

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It's easier to talk than listen in a classroom. When Sameea began my Writing Methods course, she was eager to be more open-eared than the high school teachers she'd had. In particular, she wanted to be nothing like her journalism teacher, the woman who had shouted at Sameea in front of the whole class after reading the first draft of a letter Sameea had composed to the editor of the local paper.

The newspaper had run an article ranking area schools by test scores, making special note of those schools that had experienced what Sameea remembers as a “drastic decrease in performance.” Sameea's high school was one of those schools. Armed with ideas from her sociology elective, Sameea connected her school's “drastic decrease” to the recent and drastic *increase* in students from underprivileged backgrounds. It made sense to Sameea that these students' test scores were low; “students coming from underprivileged backgrounds *will* struggle in school.” What did not make sense to her was that the school's newfound diversity garnered no

positive press. Whereas she “used to be one of the only ethnic minorities in the entire school,” there were now “students from many backgrounds—including immigrants, refugees, and teens relocated to the suburbs from the poorest neighborhoods [of the city]—but it was not being embraced.” In the first draft of her letter to the editor, Sameea asked, “Why are we not celebrating the new diversity and working towards a better future as an integrated community? Why isn’t ‘success’ measured as the amount of dynamic diversity in a school?”

And then came the shouting. Sameea’s journalism teacher, in front of all her students, “howled” at Sameea: “This is the most offensive thing I ever read!” Next, Sameea remembers, the teacher wrote on Sameea’s paper, with her “big red pen...in colossal letters”: “RACIST!” Though her teacher had likely misinterpreted her claim that the school’s new minority students “*will* struggle” as a statement of minority students’ inevitable failure, rather than as an indictment of the systems that had failed those students, that “slap” of a word made Sameea feel “dejected.” She made only a few, small edits to the letter to please her teacher before submitting it to the community paper.

Sameea shared this story with her writing group in the methods course—a public promise to be less like her journalism teacher and more like the sociology instructor who later called Sameea to her at the beginning of class to praise Sameea’s first printed piece. Spread across the teacher’s desk was an open newspaper, and there was Sameea’s letter to the editor for all to see. That day, Sameea first knew, “My thoughts *are* valid, and conveying them through writing is my purpose.” The newspaper published her letter online, too, and, in the comments section, a dialogue started about “the flaws in the education system.”

Just weeks after sharing this story with her peers, Sameea had a chance to start another dialogue: she led her first (albeit practice) writing conference. Afterwards, she proudly told me

that she “maintained a positivity throughout.” Still, she found herself “speaking the majority of the time.” She reflected: “I could have given the writer more of an opportunity to speak and to ask me questions. For some reason,” she said, “the teacher feels the need to be the one keeping the control.”

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During that Writing Methods course, Sameea agreed to be a participant in my research study on writing teacher identity development. She comes to my office after each semester and we write together about memorable classroom moments (as students, observers, or teachers) and talk about them and more. When I review the transcripts of our conversations, I can’t help but compare our blocks of text. Am I talking too much? Am I talking enough?

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In her article, “Toward Explaining the Transformative Power of Talk about, around, and for Writing” (2012), Beth Godbee describes how collaborative writing talk can “challenge asymmetrical power relations in the moment and over time” and how the resultant relationship-building can lead to heightened “critical consciousness” and deepened, or even new, “commitments” (p. 181). Godbee comes to her conclusions after observing in a university writing center and offers a case study of Kim (tutor) and Susan (student) to illustrate her findings. As Kim and Susan discuss Susan’s writing, they “share troubles” both academic and personal. In doing so, they “raise awareness of issues that matter,” especially in relation to issues motivating Susan’s writing, as they continuously “unpack” ideas, “dig deeper,” and “refuse to accept easy answers.” Kim and Susan “strengthen their individual commitments,” but as they tell

stories that “mirror each other,” they also “more easily come to care about the other’s lived experience and the values underlying the research and writing they review on an ongoing basis.” In the process, power relations are “redistributed”; Kim and Susan work *together* (p. 190).

When I first read Godbee’s article, at the suggestion of one of my dissertation committee members, I found it benign and affirming—proof of what was obvious but sometimes ignored: sharing and talking about writing builds relationships and commitment. When I re-read it, however, what always happens when one re-reads did. Words and ideas that hadn’t caught my attention the first time around stood out from those around them, rose off the page in illuminated bas-relief: “acting in the world,” “concrete changes both in writers’ personal lives...and in their surrounding communities” (p. 190). And soon, these words lost the hazy glow of promise and began to poke at me like so many thistles. Kim and Susan hadn’t just deepened their relationship and commitments. With Kim’s help, Susan retook and passed her doctoral preliminary exams, and armed with knowledge from Susan’s doctoral project, Kim took on an open adoption. Could Sameea and I similarly venture out? Deepened relationships and commitments weren’t enough. Sameea and I needed to *act*. We needed to create *change*.

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After Tom McNamee’s session, I head to one on writing soap box speeches. The focus is civic engagement, and as I sneak into the classroom and behind a camera crew and some parents, the presenter is already helping the middle schoolers articulate changes they would like to see in their school communities. One girl thinks there’s too much testing, another too much bullying, another not enough money for after-school sports. The presenter is a skilled teacher, leading the kids through a series of scaffolded activities to compose—and even revise—calls to action. Still,

when students read out their 30-second products, I cannot help but think of the implications of the *soap box*; their words are *impromptu*, making use only of what is at hand: a soap crate from who-knows-where. There has been no time for research on underlying causes, activists' efforts, target audiences.

The presenter passes around a flyer, and I am impressed by the programs offered by the organization she represents. Through them, young people can join civic committees, get internships. Here and now, though, I see the speeches students gave just minutes ago forming a cloud above our heads: all those attempts at pathos, logos, and ethos going nowhere, swirling in a stratus of buzzing words. I imagine such a haze looming just below the drop-ceiling and fluorescent lights in *my* classroom, as I wonder if my attempts at providing authentic audiences for my students' writing have really opened any windows or doors. Then, I imagine words trapped in the upper atmospheres of classrooms down the hall, down the street, across town, across the state, until my head begins to hum with the static of impotent voices.

I am startled from the building drone by a big voice coming from a girl in the front of the classroom. She is a special guest—last year's city-wide soap box speech champ—and all energy. She is telling the story of how she rewrote her speech for the new audience at nationals, how she learned to still her always active hands while she performed. In this moment, though, those hands are alive, birds flying around her head as she describes the happy shock of finding out at nationals that work already *was* being done around her issue, that others *were* concerned about teens' social and emotional health in schools. She'd been approached after the competition by some like-minded folks and now felt part of the conversation.

I try to let this silver lining shine a minute before shadowing it with my waxing criticism: How did she get all the way to nationals without researching the history of her issue? Yes, when

she got there, she learned and networked, but she was only *one* of a major metropolis of kids to get there.

And even she is stuck talking to herself. As the session ends with a video of her winning performance, she retreats to the back of the room where she lip syncs her speech, talking to no one at all.

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A few meetings ago, Sameea told me she was worried about the social-emotional health of Tenai, a girl she teaches in a remedial weekend program. Tenai talks to no one and “hardly smiles,” though as a middle-schooler she used to be “bubbly” and “sweet,” a “respectful” and eager student, a hugger. These days, she looks “bored” always, sometimes “disgust[ed]” or “sad.” Sameea has worked with Tenai for a few years now and used to teach her brother, Tevari, too, so on a recent Saturday she tried to draw Tenai out of her quiet by asking about him. She “instantly regret[ed] it.” Tenai’s face became “even more swallowed up” and she could manage only a “monotone voice” as she told Sameea that her brother, now in high school, skips class and was just suspended for having drugs.

This moment, Sameea told me, was when she “internalized what [she’s] been learning all these years about ‘the system.’” She *felt* it, cold and machine-like. Its gears grind up “zeal for learning,” make gravel of “creativity.” The system is not a human thing. As proof, there was Tenai before her, colder, a blank face. Just as Tevari, also once “bright and enthusiastic,” had become “that kid,” that statistic. It takes human warmth to counter the system, it takes “writ[ing] about and *do[ing]* something that’s meaningful” for teacher and student “both.”

“You know what I mean?” Sameea asked me.

The scariest thing, she lowered her voice to tell me, is that she can see how it happens, how “when you’re working under a school system and you’re working with administration and you’re working with state standards and you’re working with national standards...teaching is slowly, slowly becoming this separate entity of just work.” Teachers become not the mentors Tevari needed; they become automatons.

And I saw it, saw Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, which I had just read for my graduate exams, come to life: Sameea as a factory worker sending students, one indistinguishable from the other, down the line. She is alienated by this “estranged labor,” alienated even from “her own body, as well as...[her] spiritual aspect, [her] human aspect” (Marx p. 32).

But not yet. Sitting in front of me, red lipstick matching her bright headscarf, Sameea began to recount the ways she was trying to resist: “[Because] I have a fear of becoming this mechanical robot, I think I try—I always have to keep grounding myself in that humanness, so I think I haven’t quite gone too far away. ...I still am very much present with my students. I have to ask them how they’re doing. I have to talk to them. You know, during the home room periods, some classes do [one] minute, timed tests and I’m like, No, we’re just going to hang out and chill and talk, you know? I don’t want to make them feel like they’re in a prison.”

Still, Sameea mourned her curriculum that once was: “What it used to be was, you know, we would write movie reviews and we would write—like, we had a spoken word unit, and those things are now not there. They’re not there. We don’t have the time for it, cuz there’re *five weeks*, right? Five Saturdays—and within those five Saturdays *my* job is to make sure that their pre-assessments and their post-assessments show some kind of an improvement. Or that in their regular schools their grades are going up from C’s and D’s to hopefully B’s and C’s—at *least*.



And what the [program director] has said on occasion is that these things *are* happening and that the program *is* helping them and their grades are improving significantly, so I feel like if I were to just kind of come down and do the fun things that *I* like to do, I would be maybe jeopardizing that. I *try* my best, but sometimes it's like you have to prioritize—you don't *have* to but *I* feel like I have to prioritize making sure that every student in my class knows where to put a comma.”

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After soap box speeches, it is across the hall to a session on spoken word. In the program, the presenter is labeled a “teaching artist,” a title I at first assume must be one given to teachers who excel at their teaching craft—but given by whom, I wonder, and why haven’t I heard of it? When I learn that it is the name for artists—poets, painters, musicians—who work with area schools, I am not sure of which version I am more jealous; I want to be considered an artist of teaching *and* an artist, period. I try to stop constructing a soap box in my brain, try to stop myself from starting an old harangue against the view of teaching-as-technocracy.

But I have no chance to get worked up, because the teaching artist is immediately enchanting. His name is Elijah, and he is a tall, slender man—a young man but agelessly so, could be 25 or 35. He enunciates, he intones, his voice somehow always soft. And he has got style—tailored slacks, a tucked in fine shirt under a high, v-neck sweater. He is confident. He is smart. I can tell he knows composition theory, that he’s walked the walk as he talks a room full of strangers through free-writing, through poem generation.

We are willing students; we play along. And he takes us to unexpected, artful places with language. Sure, there are some naturals here, like the girl with the bouquet of hair atop her head

who is already planting poem seeds with ease: honeysuckle this, tangerine that. But even those less confident cannot help—under his tutelage—but find some word surprise.

He is unfailingly thankful for our words, snapping when they're moving, honoring the mysterious beauty of even the unclear. When one girl takes as her subject a Disney film, he doesn't snap but is still thankful, respectful of her bravery in sharing.

When it is time for a final free-write, I cannot help but write about the poetry workshop I used to run for a creative writing elective when I was a high school teacher. I write about trying to be as encouraging as Elijah but being unable to withhold even the smallest of suggestions, for there were grades to defend, contests to enter, a prestigious program's legacy to uphold. I cannot help but write about Eddy, the boy who on the last day of class said he knew I didn't really like his writing, despite my having alternated compliments with suggestions as I wrote in pencil on all of his poems. I realize that I never talked one-on-one with him about his work and wonder if that would have made a difference. I am pretty sure so. Then, to soften the blow of the memory of Eddy, I think of all those students with whom I did get close, of the post-graduation literary salon I held in my living room. But I cannot shake Eddy, so as Elijah is thanking us for sharing our words and our selves with him, I speed-scribble about how my writing perfectionism has probably robbed not only my students but also me of some serendipity, of some word- and image-gifts. And as I close my notebook, I wonder if I even know how to *just* word-play. There's never been time for just word-play.

And yet we've just played for an hour and fifteen minutes. The world of middle schools—these are young adolescents after all—must be different. And so I catch up to ask a teacher accompanying her students, but she tells me no: "It's all argumentative writing and

paragraph graphic organizers there now, too. But I sneak the personal and creative writing in here and there. I've got to."

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Back in my writing methods course, I snuck in a narrative writing exercise during our unit on literary analysis. I was trying to show Sameea and her classmates one way we can invite students' stories even as we study literature. The exercise, adapted from the "Text Explosion" taught at Bard College's Institute for Writing and Thinking, was this: As I read aloud an early passage of John Gardner's *Grendel*, the story of Beowulf told from the eyes of the "monster," I asked students to circle any images or phrases that called to them—for any reason or even for no discernible one. Then, I asked students to pick one phrase or image, write it on their own paper, and then use those words as the beginning of a short, first-person, non-fiction narrative or free-write. When I slowly re-read the passage aloud, each student was to interrupt me when I'd read her chosen phrase, repeat it, then read her narrative. When she was done, I continued with the passage until I was interrupted again. By the time I'd finished, we'd told a collective story, one that went in many directions but was grounded in Gardner's imagery and diction: "so it goes with me age by age," "the deadly progression of moon and stars," "spinning a web of words," "fists clenched against my lack of will," "the cold mechanics of the stars," "space hurls outward," "the cold night air is reality at last: indifferent to me," "playing cat and mouse with the universe."

Of course, Gardner wasn't just playing with images, I told my students; he was communicating through them. They reflected his protagonist's beliefs and emotions—as did *our* stories which, born of Grendel's words, echoed his existential angst. And as we charted our

chosen phrases, the ideas around which they orbited came into sharper focus. The stars weren't "cold" because it was a chilly night; rather, Grendel felt the heavens had no feeling for him. Indeed, he suspected the heavens might not house anyone at all. The real power rested with the spinner of words, the Shaper. A sort of press secretary for the king, this Shaper had spun quite a tale about the "villain" Grendel. All Grendel could do was try to catch us in the web of his own version of events.

When we wrote ourselves into Grendel's story, we were able both to empathize with him and to see his word-web for what it was: a persuasive narrative. Sameea, in particular, became especially taken by Gardner's book, finding in it a language for talking about the messages spinning around her, messages coming from media, politicians, school districts. She began talking about the importance of disrupting dominant narratives, as Grendel had done, like ones that said test scores mattered more than diversity. She had always advocated for the importance of talking to and listening to others, and now she had a language for explaining why such conversation could be so powerful: an individual's story could bore a hole in the wall of accepted narrative. Many stories might bring that wall down. And yet there were commas to place in just the right spaces: bits of mortar between the bricks or not?

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When Sameea talks of disrupting dominant narratives, I cannot help but think of Harvard historian Jill Lepore's *New Yorker* article "The Disruption Machine" (2016), which has attuned me to the popularity of "disruption," if of a different kind than Sameea is after. In it, Lepore describes how the idea of "disruptive innovation," an idea born in business schools, is so pervasive that it has made its way into "arenas whose values and goals are remote from the

values and goals of business,” arenas such as public schools. Ever since Clayton M. Christensen introduced the concept in his 1997 book *The Innovator’s Dilemma*, Lepore says, “everyone is either disrupting or being disrupted.” And ever since I’ve read Lepore’s article, I do, in fact, see references to disruption everywhere—in the manner that I have only noticed the many Toyotas in my neighborhood since I bought one. Open an email from the National Council of Teachers of English and what do I see? The text of a recent conference speech by Joyce Locke Carter that begins, “Knowing I was speaking about disruption, I thought ‘what’s more disruptive than playing punk music for an academic talk?’ So I played punk for you. I’ll play some more punk for you after the talk.”

Before I read Lepore’s article, Locke Carter’s call for “disruption” in her field (composition/writing education) likely would not have registered as all that different from the many calls for change to be heard at a conference. But when paired with “innovation,” as it is in Locke Carter’s talk and many, many other places these days, disruption brings with it the distinct baggage of the competitive marketplace. When Sameea says she wants to disrupt dominant schooling narratives, she is *not* using “disruption” in the sense Christensen uses it when he advocates disruptive innovations in his later book *Disrupting Class* (co-authored with Curtis W. Johnson and Michael B. Horn, 2008). Per Christensen, “disruptive innovations take root...in new plane[s] of competition—where the very definition of what constitutes quality, and therefore what improvement means, is *different* from what quality and improvement meant” (Christensen, Johnson, and Horn, 2008, p. 47). Christensen advocates against the “monolithic batch mode system where all students are taught the same things on the same day in the same way” and for a “modular system” through which we can “educate children in customized ways” using computers (p. 225). Because of its affordability, computer-based customization disrupts a system

that could never afford sufficiently personalized instruction—not since the one-room schoolhouses of the early 1800’s, when the teacher-to-pupil ratio was manageable. Problem is, suggests Lepore, that while schools “have revenues and expenses and infrastructures...they aren’t industries in the same way that manufacturers of hard-disk drives or truck engines or drygoods are industries.” Indeed, “people aren’t disk drives.”

Disruption can *feel* very human: punk rockers knocking against the system. And I have no doubt some knocking needs doing. But while Christensen’s language of customization implies an understanding that people aren’t disk drives, I find it suspect that he finds it *unnecessary* to study students and schools to make recommendations about them. He writes:

Most books on the topic of improving schools have reached their conclusions by studying schools. In contrast, our field of scholarship is innovation. Our approach in researching and writing this book has been to stand *outside* the public education industry and put our innovation research on almost like a set of lenses to examine the industry’s problems from this different perspective. (p. 6).

This outside stance makes unbelievable and even comical the vignettes with which Christensen and his co-authors begin each chapter, as in the final chapter when they go to pains to paint their model as having a humanity absent in the assembly-line education to which they say we’ve become accustomed: student “Vanessa” excitedly shows student “Tim” a computer “program she’s found that helps her read music,” and teacher “Rob” sees teacher “Maria,” in the next classroom, “leaning over his own daughter, Sarah, pointing at the screen,” while thinking about recommending virtual soccer practice to the assistant coach, who happens also to be his father (p. 224). This bonded, collaborative family of learners does not clearly follow from the preceding couple hundred pages, pages that compare schools to computer companies and raise an alarm at

the high percentage of non-Americans in America's tech industry. For though Christensen distinguishes his educational model from the current one, which he describes as “inspired by the efficient factory system that had emerged in industrial America” (p. 35), both are founded—as Lepore claims disruptive innovation is—“on a profound anxiety about financial collapse, an apocalyptic fear of global devastation, and shaky evidence.” To be sure, though Christensen makes much of the individual when he talks about “maximiz[ing] human potential,” he outlines a core aspiration for schools to be to “hone the skills, capabilities, and attitudes that will help our economy remain prosperous and economically competitive” (1).

While both Sameea and Christensen are after more personalized education, Christensen seeks to “customize...student-centric learning” through “computer-based learning” and he describes such learning as “the escape hatch from the temporal, lateral, physical, and hierarchical cells of standardization” (p. 38). But Christensen's final vignette, as described above, doesn't seem an escape from the “temporal,” “lateral,” or “physical”; it seems a longing for them. While I am not at all opposed to technology in the classroom, I do wonder: is Christensen's non-fairytale version of disruption—cordoning off a kid and his computer so he can be as productive and competitive as possible—just another distraction from the human students in front of us? Has the alienation-inducing factory that Marx described just gotten a digital upgrade?

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The last session of the day is on memoir. In the back of the room are two women—a mother and aunt of a student, I think—who I am pretty sure had been in the same two desks during the day's first session. I wonder if they've moved at all, if they ever made their way downstairs for the boxed turkey sandwiches and macadamia cookies. The women are still on their phones,

occasionally addressing each other, occasionally looking up as someone new enters the room. When they see me, I smile.

The presenter is not smiling, clearly unsure of what to do with herself in these last few minutes before the session is to start. She checks something on her laptop, then goes out into the hall, comes back to the laptop, heads back to the hall. According to the program, she works in administration at Story Corps, and I'm guessing this room of middle-schoolers and parents is not her usual audience.

When she begins with a fancy PowerPoint featuring the kind of call-out questions against which I warn the student teachers I supervise, there is a lot of awkward silence. "Why is it important to tell our stories? Why is it important to listen to others' stories?" But after she plays a sample Story Corps interview—a boy with autism asking his mother about what it's like to be his parent—the kids start talking, a lot, about empathy in other words. Meanwhile, I start crying, just as I used to at 7:25 every Friday morning, the time when my local public radio station plays a Story Corps interview excerpt. I'd hear the segment when I was just about to arrive at the high school where I used to work, and I would often have to wait out my tears in the parking lot before rushing to make the 7:45 first period. Here, there is nowhere to hide, and I am thankful the lights have been turned down—thankful, too, to see another woman get out a kleenex.

Now warmed up, the kids are relatively responsive to the presenter's request to share a family story. After the first volunteer contributes a tale about getting bitten by a donkey after feeding it a tortilla, animals seem to become the theme. The next volunteer tells of an alligator intruding on a Florida walk, and I consider raising my hand to tell of the old home movie I've seen of my grandma, in Yellowstone in the late 1920's, feeding peanuts to a young bear who pulls on her dress to ask for more.



Before I get the nerve to raise my hand, I see in the door window's frame one of the event's coordinators, someone I've been trying to find all day. I'm here, after all, to gauge my interest in working with the host organization, to see if events like these are how I want to charge into the world. As I gather my things, the presenter is beginning to pair off students to interview each other, warning the parents turning to their phones and purses that they are expected to participate, too. I make my apologies as I leave, insisting that I'm not chicken, just otherwise committed.

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A couple meetings ago, Sameea arrived at my office half-disheartened, half-emboldened by a small act of rebellion. I encouraged her to write about what happened while I wrote a narrative of my own. When we were done writing, I listened to her story:

She'd been observing again at the inner-city high school where she'd been for a few weeks, and that day a boy she'd never seen before—"a young, Hispanic boy who had innocence in his eyes and walked with a limp"—sat down behind her during the Creative Writing course. When group work on screenplays began, the boy stayed put. Sameea, excited to finally do more than observe, turned around to introduce herself. After pleasantries, the boy excused himself to go to the bathroom, at which point the teacher told Sameea that the boy had been out for weeks recovering from a gunshot wound. When the boy returned, Sameea smilingly got him on the classwork track and brainstorming for the assignment. As he answered her questions, Sameea could tell the boy was "reserved but thoughtful," not the "street kid" he was billed to be. Still, she wasn't expecting it when the boy became silent before asking: "Can I write about what happened to me? I recently went through something and, yeah, I would like to write about that."

Sameea encouraged him and he started sketching a plot in the third person: The guy goes to the store to buy chips. There is a robbery, and the guy gets shot by accident. He gets really hurt and his life changes...

Suddenly, Sameea had to get out of there. Between the boy and his experience and the piano music the teacher had put on, she felt “a rush of emotion” and knew she needed a minute. She told the boy she’d be right back and then took her turn in the bathroom. She took a “deeeep breath” and scolded herself for starting to cry. “This isn’t even about me,” Sameea thought. It was his story, not hers. She didn’t want to be one of those teachers who swooped in, thinking she could—or *should*—change a student’s life.

Not long after Sameea returned to the classroom, the teacher stopped by to check in and encouraged the boy to instead write fiction, the assignment’s real intent, told him he didn’t have to be “bound to what happened in his life.” When the teacher left, the boy lost his enthusiasm, becoming aimless in his drafting. At first, Sameea tried to talk genre, to “maintain a positive *learning* climate.” And then she thought: “What am I doing? I really, really just need to have a conversation with this kid.” Because the course was an elective, Sameea thought she might be able to get away with it, and so she turned the conversation to the more general, “careful not to pry.” Soon, he was back to his story and shifted to the first person: “I had surgery. It was my abdomen. It was bad.” Then they talked about other things, too, about why he had gotten his tattoos—“NO LOVE” in black script on each hand—and about her teaching program.

When the bell rang, they gave warm goodbyes, Sameea telling him, “I’m glad you came today.” It was her “honor and privilege” to hear his story. And now they had a story of their own.

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After the sessions are over, there is to be a celebratory reading. I find a seat at the back of the school's auditorium, excited to finish a *New Yorker* article while people trickle in. I know Sameea will find the article interesting—it's about campus activism—but I want to finish it before recommending it. I've already highlighted one sentence for her—"If students' personal experiences are beside the pedagogical point, then diversity on campus serves a cosmetic role: it *is* a kind of tokenism." For me, I highlight one activist student's complaint: "'I literally am so tired of learning about Marx, when he did not include race in his discussion of the market!'" I am overwhelmed by all that these passages open up but am relieved by the thought that Sameea and I will be meeting again in a couple weeks and can talk them through, can challenge each other to *do* something with them. I think about how, when we write together, I'll probably tell the story of today's spoken word workshop, of envying the "teaching artist." But now, it's time to put away my things and listen. The reading is about to begin.

## II.

Human beings learn from the stories of others to the extent that a particular story causes them to rethink and reexamine their own experience.

—Mary Renck Jalongo and Joan P. Isenberg, *Teachers' Stories: From Personal Narrative to Professional Insight*

### **Kate, Trader Joe's, Six Months Ago**

I don't know how long I've been staring at the buttermilk before I grab it. Too long. I don't even know if I need it—I can't listen to Sameea *and* figure out if there'll be time to make pancakes before Rose's soccer game this weekend—so what the heck. Into the cart it goes.

This was a stupid idea, really, to try to fit in a grocery run and a phone meeting with a student before I have to pick up Rose in a half hour. But I don't know the next time I'll be able to talk on the phone alone for this many minutes. Not that I'm alone now; I scoot over to let two toddlers with mini-shopping carts pass and smile at the mother trying to corral them. I'm trying to seem like less of an ass than I am, talking on the phone in the grocery store, clogging the aisle.

As I settle in front of the Honey Crisp apples, Sameea is going through the pros and cons of a potential student teaching placement at Elm Ridge High School. (I figure it's legitimate to station myself here, to spend at least a few minutes weeding out bruised fruit as I talk.) It turns out the department chair has offered her the position—a real plum placement and one Sameea has been after—but now Sameea's not sure it's for her. The school's spoken word program had seemed a great match for Sameea's social justice pedagogy, but now the chair—who is new to the school herself—is warning Sameea of the students' privilege, of how hard it can be to break

into a school community where many of the teachers and parents are alumni. Sameea wants to know what I think she should do. After all, I recommended the placement. I went to Elm Ridge. My good friend teaches there. My daughter will go there one day. I live in the community.

I make myself choose some Honey Crisps—only a few as they're the expensive, organic kind—and head to the nuts section of the store while I assure Sameea, "Not everyone is wealthy here." But some sure are, I think to myself, as I pass a manicured stay-at-home in her tennis whites.

I remind Sameea that the town borders one of the worst neighborhoods of the city; that, sure, some folks are country clubbers but that others, like me, live in "little houses" and still others live in Section 8 apartments. While I outline the town's history, I go on autopilot with a story I've told for years—"1960's purposeful integration...now gay-friendly"—then force myself to break the script: "Look, I'm hesitant to push you to do this. I know you want to work with spoken word and students of color but that we don't know which courses you'll get assigned. You might end up in lily-white Honors. But at least at Elm Ridge the teachers talk—all the time—about that segregation. The 'achievement gap' is a big deal. If you student teach here, you can jump right into the conversation you say you care so much about and be in a strong school with good mentorship."

Sameea hums agreement, and I can tell I'm convincing us both this is a good idea. For just a second, I think about how long it's been since I've actually set foot in the high school.

"I know you wanted to avoid the suburbs," I continue, "but I also know you're thinking it might not be best to do your apprenticeship in a tough, inner-city school. Well, here you've got urban-suburban—a diverse student body, if segregated. I don't know. You might end up teaching

mostly white kids, but you can get involved in the ways you want to. You can volunteer to help with the spoken word team after school."

"Right," Sameea says.

I haven't tried to be right, exactly. In fact, after last semester, when a student I placed at Barnard High, the school where I used to teach, had to be pulled mid-practicum, I'm hesitant to have a firm opinion on these matters. I tell Sameea she can call me again if she needs to, tell her that we can't predict what will happen, but Elm Ridge is a unique high school and so this is a unique opportunity.

Sameea is thanking me for my time as I finally grab the three bags of nuts I buy each week—walnuts, almonds, and cashews (the honey sesame kind) that come to almost \$25. Who's rich now? I hang up, check the time on my phone (less than 15 minutes until Rose's violin lesson) and scan for the shortest checkout line.

As I will the checker to move more quickly, I try to imagine Sameea in line in front of me, stopping at this grocery store after a day of teaching, living in this community. Only then does it dawn on me that she'd be the only woman in the store wearing a hijab. Still, I see her being Sameea: making earnest conversation with the checker, smiling brightly at the two toddlers with their crashing carts.

## **Elm Ridge**

In "No Man's Land," Eula Biss describes Rogers Park, the most northern and supposedly diverse neighborhood of Chicago, along Lake Michigan. When Biss plans to move there to work at Northwestern University in the neighboring suburb of Evanston, she is warned by many people—even "near strangers"—to reconsider; it "might not be safe." She persists, wanting to

“believe in the promise” of diversity—with all its “difficult reality” and “real complexity”—though is aware that others’ fear of diversity is what keeps Rogers Park’s property values low enough that she and her husband can each have a writing room of their own in their “lake home.”

After reading Biss’s essay, I can’t help but think of Elm Ridge as a sort of Evanston and the “No Man’s Land” bordering it, the city neighborhood of Holden, as a sort of Rogers Park. Growing up in Elm Ridge, we knew better than to cross over into Holden, though all our town’s cul-de-sacs made that close to impossible anyway. By the time we were old enough to drive into the city, we knew: Don’t drive through Holden. If you have to drive through Holden, put your seatbelt through your purse strap to avoid a grab-n-go. Go through a red light if you have to. Naturally, when we turned 16 and got the car keys, we drove through Holden because we could. Some of us played the “bad neighborhood game”: points for storefront churches and beauty parlors, double points for beauty parlors with church-y names. “Some” might have included me.

My parents had grown up in Elm Ridge, and my dad couldn’t quite let go of the vision of the Holden he’d known years before: grand victorian homes, the supper club where he’d been a bus boy, the lush 130-plus acre park designed by a famous landscape architect. A couple times, when I was nine and my parents had returned to Elm Ridge after twenty years away, we snuck onto the park’s golf course at dusk—just enough time to play a few free holes. Soon, though, we knew it wasn’t smart to linger in Holden. Once in a while, we’d drive through to avoid the congested highway and would wish it were still safe to walk along the park’s lagoon.

When I learned about gentrification, saw it happen to the once-“blighted,” inner-city neighborhood where my dad had taught middle school, I tried to resist my selfish longing for a gentrified Holden, no matter how much I wanted to stroll its park. And gentrification didn’t even seem possible; Holden is regularly called the “deadliest” and “most violent” area in the city.

And then there is Elm Ridge, across the street but in a different universe: two-thirds white to Holden's 95% black. A median home value over *ten* times that of Holden's. Theater-in-the-park and its very own symphony orchestra. How surprised I am when, as an adult, I invite some of my former high school students from a farther out suburb to my Elm Ridge home, and their parents forbid the trip to my "dangerous" town. A few students, eager for the literary salon I've promised, risk it, telling their parents they'd had it wrong: I don't live in Elm Ridge after all. I don't know of their deceit until the students have arrived, so I feed them and listen to their poems. When one student starts hyperventilating from a previously unknown cashew allergy, I try not to panic, but what will her parents say if they have to come get her *here*? Thankfully, Benadryl calms her breathing. Still, when the last poem has been read and we step into the Elm Ridge night, I can tell she and her friends are all still a bit hyped up on their own daring to disobey their parents, to be here after dark.

As I watch the girls pile into a shiny SUV and drive away, I wonder if their moms feel more comfortable than I do being alone outside at night. I feel no specific or imminent threat, but I don't linger in the yard. By the time I've finished loading the dishwasher, I'm too tired to feel insulted by the girls' view of Elm Ridge. And by the time I tuck Biss's book under the side of my bed, turn off the lamp, and settle into almost-sleep, I'm thinking this: one person's Rogers Park is another person's Evanston, one person's Elm Ridge is another person's Holden, one person's ghetto is another person's home.

### **Sameea, Initial Interview, Two Years Ago**

"How did I become an English Education major? Well, it's kind of weird...I was thinking I was going to be a psychology teacher or a sociology teacher, or something like that, because



the [high school] teacher that did have an impact was this psych teacher of mine. She was *crazy*. She would stand up on *desks* and shout at us. That's the kind of crazy I'm talking about. And she had a really raspy voice, and she would yell—you could hear her from across the building and you knew that was Miss B. And she would just call you *out* on, like, how we're just so stupid [laughing] and the things that are going on in the world and the inequalities. You know, I went to school in a very privileged *white* neighborhood. That's not where I *lived* but I went to that school. So, she was mostly calling them out, kind of like, You're not aware of what's outside of your little bubble. And it made me think about, Yeah, that's true. *I'm* not aware of it. But think about the suburbs in general. They're just in this little bubble—where they're very comfortable and their problems are so minute that they've very skewed vision of the world. That's kind of messed up. I think it's the teachers like Miss B that kind of do their duty and kind of bring that truth to the classroom. Now, she was a part-time college professor, so she was involved in *it—it* meaning she was a part of this dialogue about injustices and stuff, but none of us really—all the other teachers were not. They were just kind of like, Literature this and that.

“But I realized that it's kind of weird how small your bubble can be and how you really need to get *out* of it, so I think that was the reason why I wanted to go to [an urban, public university], was an effort to get out of the bubble. Because I could have easily gone to a suburban [university], a place where a *lot* of [brown Muslim] girls like me go: it's a [Christian] university—it's private—but it's *filled* with Muslims and I decided against it because of that very reason of just going out of that comfort zone. Just go away from it, you know?

“So I did, and I came in as a Soc major actually because I was like, That teacher taught me sociology. She taught me about what the world is, and I want to teach that, too. So I was kind of juggling with being a teacher and liking sociology and liking the study of human interaction,

but then there isn't really *that* program offered. But then I was like, Teaching of History, maybe? But I just can't see myself doing that cause it's just not for me—History was never that interesting to me. I think it's *important*, but I don't think I could teach it very well. So *then* I was like, Okay, English. This is that one that has always been lingering but I've always avoided it. I've always been a writer. I've always liked to write, so maybe there is some calling? I'm good at papers. I'm good at English. So, I, I *did* it. I changed my major. And, honestly, it was the weirdest thing because nothing in my life until that point had—just in terms of academics—had made so much sense to me. Like, nothing. Honestly. I, I just kind of used to go with the flow, but all my classes I've taken since I've been a teaching major have been just like a very—just *fit* so well. It's crazy to think about, but, it just felt so right. And English in college was *so* different from my English in high school. And I was like, Yes! This *is* what I am good at, and I actually had that realization that there's something I do that's actually *good* which is I can *write* and I can *interpret* and I can *analyze* and I didn't know I had those skills, because I didn't really *use* them in high school. So there was a lot of unleashing happening.”

### **Kate, Instructor's Home, 10+ Years Ago**

I know immediately that I've said the wrong thing and that there's no going back. Even though she lets me explain myself, nodding as she always did when I'd speak during her Philosophy of Education course, her eyes aren't charged with agreement anymore. They're flat, distant, the way they were when she told our class about her baby that died—a baby I assume is the one in a framed picture on the foyer bookcase.

Only a half hour ago, I was standing in that foyer—just arrived, waiting for her to run and turn off the whistling kettle. Then, our voices were all brightness, calling to each other between

rooms. How great to see you! Who could believe I was already about to start student teaching?! How great of her to write me a letter of recommendation *and* have me for tea! Can you believe it turns out we live so close to each other?!

When I discovered the image of the infant in its hospital bed and tangle of wires, I tried to keep the sun in my voice, though then—as when she’d mentioned the baby in class—I found myself resenting, just a little bit, the shadow it cast, its intrusion. For this, I scolded myself, and when I heard her returning footsteps, I quickly turned from the photograph to remark on the stained glass. What a beautiful Victorian!

Now, here we are, in her lovely sitting room with its patterned wallpaper and period wooden chairs, and I’ve ruined it all. When she’d asked where I hoped to teach, I started on the right track: in my father’s footsteps, in a city school, like one of the schools in which I’d observed for the program. But then I had to keep talking. And it had seemed right to share—what with being in her home, being almost neighborhood friends.

“I’ve never said this out loud, but I don’t think I can teach white kids. They’re spoiled. They don’t need me.” I know it’s harsh and an exaggeration, but it feels good to spit out this seed of a feeling which, having been admitted, starts to wither. After all, I don’t want to fulfill the “nice white lady” teacher stereotype. After all, I’ve read the research suggesting that minority kids might be best served by minority teachers.

Having come off the ledge of my reckless admission, I’m blind-sided by the disappointed surprise in her eyes: “Kate, *all* kids need a good teacher.”

And I realize how horrible I sounded. Her surviving kids are white, after all. We are both white, after all.

“Look, I know I *can* teach white students and that I’ll do right by them. I was just trying to be in touch with my biases, like you taught me to do.”

She doesn’t rush me to finish my tea or anything, but when she says its time to pick up her kids, I wonder if it really is. Only years later, when I am teaching education students of my own, will I realize that her pain is in feeling she has failed me.

But I will think of her often before that: when, just a semester after our tea, I student teach at Barnard High, in a mostly white suburban district, and love it; when, just months after that, I accept a teaching job in that same district; when, just a few years later, I anxiously check my newborn’s breathing; when, just a few years ago, I leave the high school classroom, as she did, to return to graduate school and teach pre-service teachers in a program focused on urban education.

In all these years, I end up seeing her around Elm Ridge only once. She’s walking out of a parking garage as I’m heading in. Her eyes smile and we exchange kind—if rushed—greetings. She seems truly happy that we’ve run into each other, but I can’t help wondering what she really thinks of me.

**Sameea, Excerpt from Literacy History, “Sisterhood of the Traveling Journal”**

“As if middle school is not a difficult enough time for any adolescent girl. This also (quite conveniently) happened to mark my transition from a small, private Islamic school to a large public school. I am proud to say today that the number of friends I had at this particular time and place was exactly ZERO. The reason? I simply did not effortlessly fall into a category the same way my peers did. I hated the idea of being defined by a clique—not to mention, I could not relate to any of those strangers and their odd behaviors. *What was the point of those*

*boys and girls 'dating' each other for a week's length? Who decides one's popularity, anyway? Why can't anyone say my name correctly? Why does everyone ask me where I am from?*

"I needed an outlet, a way to stay sane. It was this sentiment of seclusion that inspired me to originate the sacred journal. This journal would be passed on among my two cousins—the only people my age that I could relate to at this fragile time in my life. The three of us went to completely separate schools, and I strived to make this journal a way to keep us close. We took turns keeping this journal in our possession—writing our deepest thoughts and sharing embarrassing stories. It soon became my personal sanctuary amidst my troubled days at school. They would write appropriate amounts in it, whereas I would write pages and pages of endless rant. They would fill two to three pages, whereas I would write for ten pages straight without blinking.

"I didn't even think twice about taking it out in the middle of class to write. I sat in the very back of class, trying to be invisible to my teachers so that I could write in it, instead of doing whatever tedious labor everyone else was doing. I vented my frustration through the journal. All the things I wanted to talk about with others but couldn't because they just wouldn't relate, were said in those pages. I realize now that I in particular really *needed* that journal more than my other two members. Unlike for them, it was helping me on a psychological and emotional level. It was a little piece of home and belonging I brought to school. It was my armor against these aliens. It was a reminder of a happier place, where I *do* exist. In my mind, it was the only thing keeping me from disappearing into tiny particles that float up to the sky, dissolving into nothingness."

## **Kate, Early 1980's**

“H-O-N-K-Y.”

I watch her carve the word with the corner of the putty knife I have just used to smooth the wet cement in front of my house. I do not stop her, didn't stop her when she said “Give it here” and took the tool from my hand a minute ago. She is twice my height, I swear. Her friend is smaller, but they are both older than me, I can tell. I look around for my older sisters—I'm not often left alone outside—and am relieved when I don't see them. They would make such a fuss over me afterward, I am sure, though I am not sure why.

I think I know what a “honky” is—it is me—but the girls seem more matter-of-fact than mean about it. They don't look at me after they've finished, just hand back the putty knife and resume walking and talking, unwrapping watermelon and green apple Jolly Ranchers as they go.

The smaller girl looks a little familiar, and I wonder if she was one of the girls who came to play double-dutch with Pascion's cousin, the cousin who called me “double-handed,” even though I know I'd been turning the ropes right, and wouldn't let me jump. Since then, I've been practicing my pop-ups and my mambos, even without a rope when my sisters won't turn, so my feet won't mumble, won't stumble in front of Pascion's cousin with her beaded hair that I covet, with those purple and white globes at the tips.

I wait until the girls are out of site to re-smooth the cement's surface, then pick up the cellophane flowers they've left behind on our lawn. Might as well. My dad'll make me pick them up anyway. That's what we get for living right between a candy store and a school. But maybe not for long. My dad's been looking at the paper after dinner, circling houses in Elm Ridge and having me read the descriptions to my mom. It's pretty exciting, but I can't imagine living anywhere else. What I'm trying to imagine as I watch the girls turn the corner by the school is

Pascion's cousin letting me double-dutch with the big girls: I see her purple and white beads tapping her shoulders then flying blue-skyward where I'm looking as I wait for my turn, as I wait for the rope's rhythm to match my count so I can get in without tripping, so I can get in.

### **Sameea and Kate, Methods Course, Two Years Ago**

Sameea has just finished teaching her English Education classmates a lesson on John Gardner's *Grendel*, focusing on how public narratives are manipulated by those in power in order to uphold cultural and ideological norms. Now, Lily is up.

Lily is less comfortable in her teaching skin than Sameea is. As she makes her way to the board, she adjusts and readjusts her skirt, and even the skin on her legs seems to be reddening to match her cheeks' blush. I and her classmates crane our necks and smile, trying to ease Lily's nervousness, trying to reward her ever-earnestness.

Though she stumbles over her introduction, I can tell Lily has done as we discussed: she has clearly practiced what she plans to say and has all her materials ready to go. While she talks, she tapes small pieces of paper on the board, each containing a six-word memoir. Then, she invites us to take a tour of the memoirs as we think of how we might represent ourselves in just six words.

Like Sameea, Lily is working from *Grendel*, trying to make it relevant to our lives. She reminds us that, to Beowulf, Grendel is a monster. To Grendel's mother, the "monster" is her son. And while Grendel admits his barbarity he knows he first tried to befriend the Anglo-Saxons—if only they could understand his language!—so "monster" isn't an easy label to wear. Lily tells us: "Others may not see you as you see yourself. This is your chance to tell them how you have experienced the world."

Lily circulates as her classmates try to distill their selves. I catch her eye and wink, knowing she can always use a bit of encouragement. When, a few minutes later, she announces “Let’s just take another minute,” I flinch at recognizing one of my stock phrases come out of another’s mouth.

Lily asks for a volunteer to begin the sharing and then suggests we continue around the circle. Though we do learn of some unexpected hobbies—who knew Joanna’d been an archer all these years?—many of the memoirs are predictable (“I have always wanted to teach”), and we steadily make our way around the circle. So lulled are we by Lily’s regular hums of appreciation that we don’t at first register how Eric’s memoir shifts the tone in the room.

“Can you read that again?” Lily asks.

Eric leans forward and seems to push his feet into the floor as he reads, again: “Hands up. Don’t shoot. I’m *angry*.”

Lily thanks Eric for repeating his memoir and seems about to ask the next person to share but instead looks back at Eric who is uncharacteristically serious, teeth clenched. “Can you explain your memoir to us?”

Lily is not familiar with the story of Michael Brown or the controversy over what he actually said before being shot by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. She is familiar with going to school and working two jobs and with staying up most of the night doing homework, but she has somehow missed the events so central to her classmate’s self-definition. As she listens to Eric talk about having to face what it is to be a black body in America, Lily begins to look as if she might cry. I’m not sure if the swelling tears reflect her usual empathy or if her insecurity is creeping back in; this is *not* how she expected the lesson to go.



But Eric, too, is in unexpected territory. I can tell he has surprised himself with the rawness of his self-revelation—with his *anger*—when he stops, takes a breath, and says “That’s it” before turning to the classmate on his left to signal he’s ready to move on.

After all her classmates have shared, Lily shares her own six-word memoir: “Bet you didn’t know I’m Latina.” We didn’t.

After Lily’s lesson, I’ve reserved time for a debrief: What did Lily do well? Any suggestions for improvement? Lily takes notes as her classmates offer a litany of comments about pacing and transitions, only stopping and looking up when Sameea calls out: “Can I thank you?”

“For what?”

“For letting it get real in here. You didn’t have to stop and ask Eric questions, but you did. That’s pretty awesome.”

“Was it? I didn’t know if I was doing the right thing.” Lily turns to Eric. “I’m really sorry if I seemed ignorant.”

“I’m sorry I threw that curve ball into your practice lesson.”

Before we can talk more about it, students from the next class begin making their way into the room. We take the hint and start to pack our things.

Later that day, I’ll recount the episode to a colleague whose first question is, “Ooo—Do you think Eric will make it through the program?!” We’ve only ever graduated one black male.

Later that night, I’ll get an email from a white male student who had said close to nothing in class that day. He writes that on the way home he’d been stuck in traffic because a Black Lives Matter protest spilled into the street. “I wanted to support them,” he writes, “there or on social media—somewhere—but who am I to speak?”

### **Kate, Elm Ridge, Late 1980's**

The playground stretches out before me like a cadastral map (about which I have just learned during my first social studies class at my new school). Boundaries are clear. Ownership is clear. The white girls own the playground. The black girls own the black top—better for double-dutch. Before I can figure out which way to go, two white girls head in my direction from the swings. One's a blond and one's a brunette, but they are clearly twin queens of the fourth grade. They tell (don't ask) me to come play with them.

Actually, the fourth grade queens want me to play with one then the other as each wants to “try out the new girl.” From the way they're not looking at each other, I think they might have had a fight, that maybe they're using me to settle the score, threatening each other with replacement. The brunette, Tricia, and I make sand castles for five minutes before the blond, Emma, interrupts to take me to climb the wooden fort. They look across the park at each other more than at me, so I am not surprised that when the bell rings both leave me behind.

The next day, I head right to the jump rope. Even though I don't know any of the girls, I know the rules of this game. When it's my turn and I do all-arounds without messing up, one of the girls turning rope laughs high in appreciation, and I try not to smile too big. On the way in from recess, she tells me her name is Crystal and I can be friends with her. She can't play after school or anything, because she doesn't really live here—just uses her grandma's address to go to this school, don't tell anyone—but I can play with them again tomorrow, and I'm going to have to take a turn turning. I'm not double-handed am I? I assure her that no, I'm not double-handed; I can keep a steady beat all day long. And she laughs again as we climb the stairs to my new school home.

## Kate and Sameea, E-Mail Exchange, One and a Half Years Ago

“Hi Kate,

“I wanted to talk to you after class about the short story you gave me to read last week [“Saint Chola” by K. Kvashay-Boyle, about the Indian American middle school girl who decided to start wearing hijab during the First Gulf War], but you were speaking to a group about the project and I had to run out and catch a train! Anyway, thanks for sharing that piece with me. I can't describe how STRANGE it felt reading something that just hit home like that. I've never read a published writing as relatable as that story...it was like a new world. I'm telling you, it is so strange to think stuff like this [about an adolescent muslim American girl] is out there!

“Once again, thanks for showing me such cool things. I appreciate it a ton.

“-Sameea”

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from “Saint Chola” by K. Kvashay-Boyle

*That night you ask your mom if you can stay home from school on account of [getting your period]. She doesn't let you. She does ask you if you want to try her hijab on, though... Shala, she says, Shala, I don't know about right now. This just may not be the time. But it has to be your choice. You don't have to if you don't want to, but you do have to ask yourself how do you represent yourself now as a Muslim woman in this country where they think that Muslims are not like you, Shala, and when you choose this, Shala, you are showing them that they know you and that you are nice and that you are no crazy, no religious nut. You are only you, and that is a very brave thing to show the world.*

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I'm so glad you enjoyed the story, Sameea!

Though I obviously don't connect with the story in the same ways you do—it was also quite strange for me to read it as the narrator and I are close to the same age so that all the pop culture references are very familiar to me. Very. Hypercolor t-shirts, wearing overalls with only one strap fastened, etc., etc. Those were some bad fashion days!

I often read the story aloud to my students—in part to deal directly with some of the mature language and in part so they could hear it at the speed suggested by the prose. And every time I read it—every time—I couldn't help but cry as I read the very end. So powerful. She instigates violence [against the boy who had been bullying her] despite her having been able to forgive him in her imagination. So powerful.

All right. . . gotta go read more [papers]!

-Kate

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from “Saint Chola” K. Kvashay-Boyle

*The day you try [the hijab] out as a test, someone yanks hard from behind and when it gets ripped off your head a lot of hair does too...It hurts enough to make you cry buy you try hard not to. Please don't let me cry, please, please don't let me cry.*

*...Then the bell rings six more times at the end of six periods and when you get home that day you have had the hijab yanked on seven occasions, four times in first period, and you've had your feet stomped twice by Taylor Bryans in the lunch line, and after school a group of eighth-graders, all of them past*

*puberty and huge with breasts in bras, surrounded you to gawk and tug in unison. And you've made up your mind about the hijab. It stays. No matter what.*

*...Now when you walk in late you're not Nobody anymore, you're not Anyone At All. Instead, now, when you walk in you have to brace yourself in advance, and you have to summon up a courage and a dignity that grows strong when your eyes go dull and you stare into unfocused space inches away while Fernando stomps on your feet and your white Reeboks get all smeared up and your face doesn't even move no matter how much it hurts.*

*The bell rings. Lunch. You push and shove your way into the culture of the Girls' Room...and all of a sudden here it comes and you're sobbing like you can't stop.*

*Hey girl, why you crying? You want me to kick some mother-fucker's ass for you, girl? 'Cause I'll do it, bitch, I'm crazy like that. You just show me who, right, I'll do it, homegirl.*

*...You picture the outcome, you picture the humiliation he'd feel, a skinny sixth-grader, a scrub, the black eye, the devastation of public boy-tears...and you know that it wouldn't solve a thing and you suspect that it probably wouldn't even stop him from pulling your hair out and stomping your feet and you picture it and you open up your heart and you forgive him.*

*Then you gather up all that new dignity, and then you look up at her, stick your covered head out of the girls' bathroom, and point.*

## Kate and Sameea, Elm Ridge High School, Orientation

As I climb three flights of stairs to meet with Sameea and her mentor teacher, I realize that I haven't stepped foot onto the fourth floor of this high school in over twenty years. I've been in the lobby since—for the annual book fair and for Rose's soccer registration—but I haven't ventured into this maze of stairs and hallways that house over 3,000 students.

I don't expect this to be an emotional trip so am surprised when I find the right classroom and my stomach shudders. I am standing not ten feet from the locker I used for all four years. Just looking at the locker I can feel its cold against my back—early morning, circled by friends, waiting for the bell.

When the bell rings now, Sameea comes to greet me, her smile painted the purple of today's headscarf. As we maneuver into her classroom, past all the exiting teenagers, I marvel at the room's grandeur—tall and arched windows, all kinds of light, insisting I don't remember this classroom. Sameea's mentor teacher overhears and proudly tells of how she and her colleagues petitioned to turn this grand room from storage into home base for a program they'd started to support the inclusion of students of color in honors courses. All kids could feel like scholars in *here*. The program came after me, and I am forced to remember that in all my four years in this high school, there was only one black girl and one black boy in all of my honors courses.

After the obligatory outline of my university's expectations for Sameea's practicum experience, I excuse myself to pick up Rose from school. Before I remember that I have to return my lanyard to security—this, too, is new—I venture down to the exit that seems it will be closest to my car. I never had class in this wing of the building but something about it is calling to my memory, something I can't quite hear until I am just before the remote exit and facing the entrance to a daycare. The facility is designed for use by both faculty and students—that is, for

teachers' *and* students' babies. And in a memory of more than 20 years ago, I hear Crystal saying, "Wave goodbye to Momma," as she smiles and laughs brightly at the baby she is handing over to a daycare worker. I am a senior in high school and I realize that I thought Crystal, my first friend in Elm Ridge from those long-ago double-dutch days, didn't even go to this high school; I haven't seen her in years. But there she is with her backpack, smiling and waving over her shoulder as she races to first period.

### **Kate at Home**

In recent months, my eight-year-old daughter, Rose is frequently too "sad" to go to bed alone. It started with *E.T.*, a film I thought was safe considering Rose was un-phased by *Lord of the Rings* and liked the eighth, and darkest, *Harry Potter* film the best. But *E.T.* doesn't stay in the realm of fantasy; Elliot is a very real boy who gets very sick. And I should have known better; when I was a girl, I ran from the movie theater when the faceless scientists advanced on Elliot's house. But while my flight stemmed from fear, Rose insists she's not scared. She's *sad*.

"It's hard to explain," she tells me, her chin like a peach pit, skin tightened in her attempt not to cry.

Over a series of nights, I get it out of her. Or she gets it out of herself, finding words for new feelings. Elliot had no control over his body. He got sick because E.T. got sick. He was so sick. He had no choice.

"But he got better," I remind her.

She nods but can't talk, the tears coming in earnest now, and I hug her until she can fall asleep.

A few nights later, there's no soothing her.

“I’m *sad*,” she says as she gives me a conspiratorial look from her loft bed. Her dad wants her to try to get to sleep on her own and her look is code for, “I know I can’t do it. Stay with me.” At the risk of angering my husband, to whom I’ve promised I will encourage Rose’s independence, I climb the stairs and make a show of adjusting Rose’s blankets so we can talk.

She says it’s not E.T. this time but she doesn’t want to talk about it. Can’t. But when we hear her dad making his way up from downstairs, she fast whisper-asks: “Can bullets come through there?” She is pointing at the sliver of window uncovered by the blinds, and the question breaks something in me.

I move to hug her and coo reassurance. “Of course not, honey. And there are no bullets around here. You’re safe, love.”

But the news was on today at her grandma’s, and she heard it. Shootings in the city. A kid hit. So I reassure her, “That’s not our neighborhood. We live in a safe place.”

And really we do. True, I sometimes wonder at all the “fireworks” nearby, but the thuds of noise are never quite close enough to give me long pause. “We live in a safe place,” I tell Rose again, and when my husband peeks in and hears this, our exchanged look is enough for him to leave me to holding our girl.

Just when I think Rose is almost asleep, she opens her eyes to ask, “Why are some neighborhoods safe and some aren’t?”

It’s late and that’s too much to get into, but I know Rose. She will keep asking questions until she is satisfied. And so I find myself telling her about the Holden of long ago and a PG version of the Holden of now, about the cycle of poverty (also PG), and about what I and my students, “like Sameea” (who Rose has met once and remembers because of her pretty headscarf and matching lipstick), are doing to try to help kids break that cycle.



This seems enough hope for her for now. Her breaths are growing longer, her eyes staying shut for longer intervals. Before long I untangle myself from her blankets and stuffed animals, untangle the cord to close the blinds all the way, and head to the hoped-for oblivion of sleep.

### **Sameea, Elm Ridge High School, Student Teaching Journal**

“A 16-year-old student was senselessly shot and killed last week. ...I was personally blown away when I came to school Friday to a sea of red, in honor of [the student]. I wore my bright red hijab and felt so strongly bonded with the overall community in this school, which is a big triumph considering the size can cause feelings of isolation.

“In...class, I was leading the class-wide discussion. Students read an article about Colin Kaepernick, the football player who decided to not stand for the National Anthem as a form of protest towards the injustices occurring against the African American community in our nation today. The classroom discussion was geared around questioning core American ideologies and the contradictions that lie within them. The conversation was a profound one about race, rights and patriotism. Towards the end of the discussion, a white female student raised her hand to contribute. She talked about how as a white person, she cannot relate to or ever fully grasp the difficulties and complexities that come with being a person of color. She then went on to describe her experience at the vigil yesterday night for [the slain student]. She stopped speaking and began sobbing. As the leader of the discussion, I did not know if it was okay for me to just ignore everyone and sit next to her and give her a hug and talk to her for a bit, which was my human instinct. But instead I let the entire class feel the pain of the girl, with her. We all agreed with her statement and needed to acknowledge the moment. So I let there be a short pause. It felt

just right. I then thanked her and, as the next student spoke, made my way to her seat so I could subtly put my hand on her shoulder and ask, ‘Are you okay?’

“I learned so much from this experience. Firstly, not to get caught up in labels like ‘suburban’ or ‘privileged’ school, because every community is complex in its own way. The [large city bordering Elm Ridge] is a unique place to teach because you can get such an array of experience from one location to another. Elm Ridge is a microcosm of that, I think: the convergence of very different life experiences and backgrounds, meeting face to face. Two worlds colliding, that is what the female student represented in her comments. And the result was something beautiful and meaningful.”

### **Kate at Home**

It is too cool for air conditioning but warm enough that we need the windows open. At first, the thwack-thwack-thwack of the helicopter doesn’t bother me; I’m used to the traffic copters’ morning hovering over the expressway a block and half away. But it’s after 10:00 p.m., and the helicopter is loitering beyond the usual five-minute layover. Eventually, I close the windows and put in earbuds to listen to a *Radio Lab* podcast, and I’m almost asleep when my husband gets up to put on shorts and shoes. I know where he’s going.

My husband isn’t nosy, though I tease him for being so. He’s a good samaritan. Since our first days together, I’ve known this, since he pulled over in barreling interstate traffic to check on the couple standing behind what appeared to be a disabled car. The car wasn’t disabled. The couple was fighting about who had insufficiently fastened the ropes holding a rug to the car’s roof. They were angry to have their fight interrupted. For a while, I begged my husband to promise he’d always mind his own business, reminded him that he didn’t have to save the world.

I've given up that fight. And so I let him head to the expressway to investigate the trouble. Also, I figure he can't get into much trouble of his own from the overpass, peering down. By the time he comes home, I must be asleep. I don't remember anything else until morning when I ask him what all the fuss was about. "Don't know," he tells me.

It's days later when we hear about the carjacking. Four people from the city had jacked a car in the suburbs then sped onto the expressway towards downtown. When the cops were on to them, they'd taken the exit ramp up to Elm Ridge, left the car, and ran—all except for a teenage boy who'd sought escape by jumping off the overpass. He didn't make it. And as I say this in my head—"didn't make it"—I think about how he obviously wasn't "making it" alive either. I think of the hope I'd given Rose. I think of needing to call her grandparents to ask them to keep the TV news off when she's around. I think of my friend who works on gun violence prevention and debates how much to tell her kids about what she sees and knows. "I want them to be empathetic," she tells me, "but how much information is too much?" I think that this is all too much.

### **Sameea, Elm Ridge High School, Student Teaching Journal**

"It is a Staff Institute Day, and 'Racial Equity' is on the agenda for today's English Division meeting. ...Some context: of approximately 35 teachers, 5 including myself are people of color. I think to myself how funny it is; here I am, in this room full of white people, talking about racial consciousness. Darnell [the African-American male facilitator] is throwing around a lot of words like 'forgiving,' 'resolution,' and 'reconciliation,' and it makes me really wonder what kinds of terrible things have occurred in the past in this department. Darnell is fiery and passionate, and some of the white staff members seem uncomfortable. At one point, he uses the

term ‘crazy white people’ during his spiel. A few moments later, a white female teacher raises her hand and comments that saying such things like ‘crazy white people’ is inappropriate and counter-productive towards the issue at hand. The tension in the room is so thick and unbearable.

“Darnell also has us fill out rubrics that measure our own racial consciousness and that of the department as a whole. I haphazardly give myself 4s and 5s on most of the sections in the racial self-assessment, mostly because I feel I have to as one of the few colored people in the room. But how does one even know where they fall on the scale? What impresses me most is how many of the white teachers rank themselves so low and speak so honestly about their own racial ignorance. They are humbled, eager and willing to listen. However, Darnell clearly isn’t a favorite of most of the teachers. All of this makes me think a lot about picking sides. What is the right side? The good side? Is it us against the white people? Then something is said towards the end of the meeting that makes a lot of sense to me. We shouldn’t have this racist=bad person, racially conscious=good person binary. In order to make real progress, we have to remove the good/bad labels. This is profound to me, and I know I don’t have to pick a side, because there is no ‘right side,’ there is no colored vs. white, as long as we are thinking collectively about closing the racial achievement gap—which I KNOW is something every single teacher in this room cares deeply about. [But I do wonder if all this thinking will change anything.]”

### **Kate on the Subway**

The white man in the seat across from me is reading Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*. Without having seen the man before, I know where he is from, and I know why he is reading the book. He lives in Elm Ridge, where all the white people who ride this train live. Elm Ridge is the end of the line, and the only thing between downtown and its neighborhoods

where white people don't go—Holden the last of them before we get to the Elm Ridge stop. He is reading *Between the World and Me* because it's the One Book, One Elm Ridge selection. Elm Ridge is the kind of town with a community-wide reading program. It's the kind of town that wants to talk about race.

But here, on this subway, is no place for a white man with this book, I think. What's he doing playing at understanding a black man's letter to his son in the age of Trayvon Martin and Tamir Rice? Better to do as I did when I started the book on a plane ride months back: take off the book jacket at least.

Part of me knows the man is braver than I. Better to read than not to read. (I stopped after twenty pages.) Better to try to understand and to be open about trying. Still, I can't shake my annoyance at the political correctness of it all and imagine a library meeting room full of white Elm Ridgers, disappointed because they had been sure some black Elm Ridgers would come for the book talk. I imagine all the Birkenstocks and hand-knitted shawls mingling at the refreshment table afterwards.

But within the jumble of these judgmental images I see, too, the unfinished book on my nightstand. And I feel the jumble of curiosity and fear that comes each time I think of the book. I'd gotten it long before it was chosen by some well-meaning librarian or committee. I knew it was an *important* book to read—as a teacher, as an American, as a *human*. What I hadn't known is that I wouldn't be able to read more than ten pages at a time without crying too hard to keep going. First, I cried because there is a need for a book like this. Then, I cried because Coates wrote that “for so long [he has] wanted to escape into the [American] Dream, to fold [his] country over [his] head like a basket. But this has never been an option because the Dream rests

on [black people's] backs, the bedding made from [their] bodies.” And then I cried because I understood what Coates meant but knew I didn't understand, not really.

And yet I did know the people and scenes of his youth because they were familiar from my own, from before my family moved to Elm Ridge. I'd heard “the music that pumped from boom boxes full of grand boast and bluster,” had seen boys shooting “basketballs through hollowed crates and crack[ing] jokes on the boy whose mother wore him out with a beating in front of his entire fifth-grade class.” I'd known of mothers putting Christmas presents on layaway in September and “cousins” who weren't really cousins. I'd watched girls with “gilded bamboo earrings that announced their names thrice over” take off those earrings for a fight. And I, too, had learned that ““Shorty, can I see your bike?”” was never a sincere question.

I doubt that the white man across from me on this train gets these sweet stabs of familiarity as he reads, but what do I know? I was just a white girl watching then and I'm just a white woman watching now. How full of shit am I, always finding a way to tell someone black that “I was the only white girl in my first school,” always assuming my whiteness and my intentions are different than others'? Still, when I close my eyes, I can hear the long ago thump-thump of a boom box—Kurtis Blow's “The Breaks”—and see my big sisters flirting with down-the-block boys. All those boom boxes and basketballs and bamboo earrings and bicycles, are any of them mine?

### **Sameea, Elm Ridge High School, Student Teaching Journal**

“Today is Friday. In [class], we are finishing with an [icebreaker] activity called “Where the Wind Blows.” The entire class of 35 stand in a circle and [my mentor teacher] explains the directions. Students are to step forward into the center of the circle when the descriptor being

said aloud applies to them. They are to take a moment and acknowledge the others in the center with them, and then go back. If you are alone in the center, the entire outside circle must give you ‘sparkles’ with their hands for your bravery. I am standing beside the boys who are too cool for a lame activity like this. They whisper and giggle to each other, making sure their body language says that they are so over whatever it is we are about to do. My mentor teacher even has to stop her directions and silence the group of boys. Then [she] begin[s reading].

“Where the wind blows...

“‘If I identify as a Christian’ ...several students walk forward.

“‘If I identify as a Jew’ ...two students who never talked step forward and nod to each other.

“‘If I identify as a Muslim’ ...I have a big grin on my face as I walk forward, and am moved as I glance around the circle to all those genuine sparkles my students give me with their hands and with their faces.

“‘Buddhist’...

“‘Agnostic’...

“‘Atheist’...

“‘Where the wind blows...if you were born in in the city’...

“‘Born somewhere in the midwest’...

“‘Born on the east coast’...

“‘West coast’...

“‘Born outside of the U.S.’... The two foreign exchange students have a moment.

“‘People who have ever been bullied’... ‘People who have ever been a bully’... There are many people coming forward for both.

“‘Married parents’...

“‘Parents who are partners’...

“‘Divorced parents’...

“‘Are or have been in foster care’...

“‘Are or have been homeless’... Tiffany walks forward and everyone sparkles for a longer moment.

“‘Are adopted’... Alex is a Vietnamese adopted boy who is hearing-impaired and very self-conscious about his speech. He walks forward so proudly and with so much personality. I feel like I know him better in this moment than I did throughout these last three weeks. And so does everyone else.

“The boys I stand with completely transform their body language. They are serious, in the moment. Many of them are clearly moved by seeing what personal struggles they share with their peers. They stand quiet and engaged.

“At the end, ‘Where the wind blows... Anyone who overcame something.’ The entire circle takes a step forward. Our circle gets smaller and tighter, and we are all standing a little closer than we were before.”

### **Sameea, Elm Ridge High School, Student Teaching Journal**

“It is Monday, and my students were to have read the very first pages of *The Crucible*. I have so much planned for today. I will start off with the Mortimer Adler article ‘How to Mark a Book’ that I read for [Kate’s class]. We will read it as a class and my students will have a more profound appreciation for the act of annotating their books. Next I will do the activity that I created for the [newspaper] article ‘How did Islam Come to This?’ The article explores the



concept of radicalized sects in religions, and I think a Muslim teacher talking about ISIS would spark genuine interest with my students. It is a great secondary text for *The Crucible* in exploring the concepts of extremist ideologies. The article even has the term ‘puritanical cult movement.’ I am proud of the materials and excited about presenting them.

“First Period: We start off with our very first reading quiz: a five multiple choice Google form I created. The questions are incredibly easy—if you read. Then I pass out the Adler article and we read together as a class. No one is reading along, because everyone is interested in the ISIS [article] that they picked up as they came in the door. Then I have them read through [the ISIS article] in pairs. Meanwhile, I look at the quiz results and am startled by how poorly they all did. Clearly, no one read. At the end of class I take a poll: only four students read, and of those only two feel confident they understand what is happening. Bell rings. Period ends. My [mentor] teacher tells me she appreciates that I am bringing in these interesting sources and putting myself in the material, but students need to be given something else at this point in time.

“Period 4: I do not put out the Isis or Adler articles for students to grab. I split [students] into six groups, and they are tasked with creating a comic strip of six boxes, illustrating and describing the key events that happened chronologically thus far in the book. Most groups are only able to get through three.

“Period 6: I project on the board a bullet point list of six key events, not in chronological order. In groups, they are to discuss and determine the correct order of events, write them in the boxes, and then illustrate the events. This time, every group completes it by the end of the period. One student even says, on his way out, That thing was pretty helpful.”

### **Kate at Elm Ridge High School, Observing Sameea**

From where I'm sitting, in a back corner of the classroom, the sound divide seems to fall on racial lines. The white boys to the left of me lean back, cool, in their seats, lips sealed. In front of them, a black boy laughs within a circle of black girls before theatrically putting his hands to his face. He's gotten Flamin' Hot Cheeto dust in his eye, he exclaims. Sameea asks after him and then asks for volunteers to read a scene of *The Crucible*. The black boy and his circle raise their hands. The white boys look on as the drama unfolds.

I force myself to widen my gaze, to see the quiet black students and the talkative white ones. To be sure, there is no color line when it comes to phone use; students of *all* hues are texting on the sly. One even texts on the not-sly-at-all, checking a message from her place on the classroom stage, mid-scene. I cannot tell if Sameea has noticed this.

This is a "regular" class, but I know Sameea is determined for it to feel exceptional. When she stops the actors to ask questions, she smiles warmly at student volunteers (mostly the actors), affirms their responses, then pushes their thinking. The subtext: *this* is no class for slackers; this is real intellectual work. Yet I can't help but tally context clues that suggest otherwise: phones secreted in books, phones leaning out of pockets, phones lounging on desks, ear buds in ears.

And I can't help but think that if the phones were spirited away, some of these kids could be ones I saw here 25 years ago—like that too-cool white boy in his Elm Ridge tennis gear. When I start to imagine (and judge) his too-big house, the inevitable ski-slope tags on his winter coat, I make myself think of my nephew who at this moment is somewhere in this high school and looks not unlike this boy before me.

Meanwhile, Sameea is deftly guiding students to make connections between the Salem-era hysteria and the immigrant- and Islamo-phobias of the current presidential campaign rhetoric. She is trying to make her and her students' time together *matter*. And so I return to my note-taking in earnest, try to organize my observations into "strengths" and "suggestions." Mostly, I brace myself for telling Sameea, who is bent on being present to all students, that I think you could be a student in this classroom and feel unseen—that today, at least, you could be a student in this classroom and never use your voice.

### **Kate at Colloquium**

By the time the Q&A starts, our semi-circle of chairs is tighter and the back is standing room only. More TAs and professors have joined us after classes and office hours, drawn by the big names up front: Stanley Fish, Gerald Graff, Walter Benn Michaels... After over an hour and a half of listening—each panelist delivered a twenty minute paper—I welcome the opportunity to stretch and turn my body to the first questioner.

I don't know how I can expect a softball question; I've been to these colloquia before, always a fierce game. But, so far, this session has seemed more a celebration of the big players' work than an invitation to swing. And the questioner's cotton candy voice doesn't seem capable of what I slowly realize it's doing, questioning the very basis of Fish's most well-known thesis: that professors should "save the world on their own time."

Fish, who had been blowing his nose at regular intervals—clearly under the weather—snaps to attention, hits back a line drive of locker room language that wakes the whole room. Through the four-letter words, I recognize the central ideas from his book that I'd read for a course a few semesters back. He'd written:

Once you start...engaging your students in discussions designed to produce action in the world, you are surely doing something, but it is not academic, even if you give it that name. You know you are being academic...when the questions raised in your classroom have the goal of achieving a more accurate description or of testing a thesis; you know that you are being (or trying to be) something else when the descriptions you put forward are really stepping stones to an ideological conclusion (even one so apparently innocuous as “we should respect the voices of others”).

And it's on. Vershawn Young, the only person of color on the panel, expectedly steps up to bat; his whole presentation had been, if indirectly, about social justice education and now he is insisting that “having an effect in the world” is the “*point*” of education. Young refrains from cursing but speaks as passionately and persuasively as Fish such that, when he sits down and Fish is silent, I assume the inning is over and that there will be one of those agree-to-disagree pauses before moving on to the next question. But then every other panelist takes a turn at the plate—each of them registering disagreement with Fish's stance.

And I am confused. Heartened, but confused. I think back to the first colloquium I attended, when a graduate student presenting on the rhetoric of the prison-industrial complex was scolded—by some of the people in this room—for letting her project turn into advocacy. What distinction am I missing here? As Michaels begins to talk, I'm searching my brain's library for details of his thesis in *The Trouble with Diversity*, a book I'd read the same semester I'd read Fish's. I remember that Michaels had outlined the evidence for “race” being a myth and had suggested that talking about race and identity and culture was a way to avoid talking about class. He had called out the intellectual left's insistence on celebrating diversity as a wholly ineffective

response to economic inequality. In an especially memorable moment, he'd claimed: "...we've been urged to respect people's identities—as if the problem of poverty would be solved if we just appreciated the poor." His argument seems to me now both academic *and* advocacy, and yet he never strays into the emotional territory that doomed that graduate student-cum-activist.

I try to keep listening as I struggle to figure out where I stand. I think about how, as an English educator, I've advised the pre-service teachers with whom I work to keep their political and religious views to themselves, lest they alienate the adolescents in their charge. Then I think of Sameea who, with her headscarf, can't exactly hide her religion. I think, too, of the difference between a high school and a university and of the emphasis, in the former, on seeing and teaching the *whole child*—on seeing and teaching 130 whole children every day. Although, who am I kidding? In the high schools where I observe, most of the educators I see aren't teaching the whole child. They are teaching English—and, even then, they are teaching only the argumentative essay and how to read like a New Critic.

By the time colloquium wraps, I'm tired of thinking and tired of the weight of the responsibilities of teaching. And by the time I am getting on the train—having run from campus to catch it so I can pick up Rose on time—I'm laughing out loud. Save the world on my own time?! I'd need "my own time" for that.

### **Sameea, Elm Ridge High School, Student Teaching Journal**

"On one of my first days of [student] teaching, I sat alone in the empty chairs of the balcony during my lunch period. A student [from one of my junior classes] walked up to me and said 'Assalamu Alaikum, I am Muslim too.' ... He is a senior which means he failed [the class] last year. We had a conversation about being Muslim. He told me that even though he had

intensive [sports] practice, he fasted during the month of Ramadan. He told me how his coach and his teammates were all constantly telling him, ‘It’s not a big deal, just drink some water!’ I asked him if he knew of a place to pray, since I’m new and still figuring it out. He told me that he used to pray in the bathroom a few times, because he just didn’t have a place. This really affected me because a) no one should have to resort to praying in such an impure place, I mean our faces have to touch the ground we pray on and it is just wrong, and b) I related to his feelings of concealing his Muslim identity in a school where... there just aren’t *many* of us. I told him that day that I would let him know if I ever found a place. I made it a sort of personal commitment to not allow him to fail this class again.

“[Weeks later] I wrote him a pass to come turn in missing work and get his grade up during my lunch. ... We worked for a while and I left to go make wudu (washing ritual) for prayer. When I got back, I asked him if he wanted to pray with me. He went to the bathroom to make his wudu. [My mentor teacher] has a rug area, but it isn’t the cleanest. I laid out a t-shirt on the rug for him, and I got a large construction paper for myself; these were our makeshift prayer mats. We both faced northeast, I stood behind him. I heard him saying ‘Allahu Akbar’ and I began as well. We recited, we stood, we bowed, we prostrated on the ground, we sat. We went through our prayer, and we did it together. And I swear that was a magical moment, a spiritual moment. I felt so alive at that time. Above all, I felt honored to be able to provide a space for this person to be who they really are. This is important, because I never had it in high school.

“A classroom is so much more than just four walls. A classroom is also more than a space where learning happens. These last few days, I realized how my space can function as a social, emotional, and even spiritual *sanctuary*.”

## Kate on the Subway

This train car is both sanctuary and sentence, both refuge and only option. The midwest temperatures are growing colder, so the number of men sleeping on the train is growing, too. Men riding to the end of the route and back again. Old men and young men.

When I take the train during off-hours, like now, I make sure to sit on the first car, by the engineer. I used to worry that by walking the extra length of platform to the supposed safety of the first car, I was marking myself racist. That was before I spent so many hours on this train and realized the first car is always the most full and full of all colors of people, sleeping and awake. *Everyone* wants to be safe.

As I watch my fellow first-car passengers, I can't help but think of the opening of Alex Kotlowitz's *There Are No Children Here*, a book I taught to suburban high school students over a decade ago. In it, young boys from a Chicago housing project play as young boys do—looking for garter snakes, exploring along railroad tracks, creating tunnels from old tires—until a train approaches and they duck for cover, one bursting into tears of fear. The boys “had heard that the suburb-bound commuters, from behind the tinted train windows, would shoot at them for trespassing on the tracks.” Meanwhile, Kotlowitz tells us, “some of the commuters had heard similar rumors about the neighborhood children and worried that, like the cardboard lions in a carnival shooting gallery, they might be the target of talented snipers. Indeed, some sat away from the windows as the train passed through Chicago's blighted core.” So much huddling and misunderstanding.

The girl now in front of me is somehow huddling and standing at the same time. Though the train is speeding ahead, she has just entered, having braved the rushing air and jostling chains

between cars. She stares at nothing as she begins a prepared speech: Her parents kicked her out when she told them she was transgender. Can we spare anything? She's hungry.

The girl is probably sixteen or seventeen, her white skin ashen save for under her eyes where long-ago applied eyeliner has smudged. She is lanky like a boy who has just had a growth spurt and, when the train jolts, it seems that she could collapse into origami folds. But she grabs hold of a nearby pole and waits, without looking around, to see if anyone will volunteer some money or food. I don't think I have anything to give today so try at least to make eye contact—I want her to know I *see* her—but I can't.

I watch her as she floats past me, toward the door, then watch as a young black man makes his way down the aisle. I wonder what his spiel will be. But before I know it, he is past me too, putting something in the ghost-girl's hand. "Get something to eat," he tells her before she floats out the door and he returns to his seat to settle in for the long ride.

### **Sameea, Elm Ridge High School, Student Teaching Journal**

"Today's [vocabulary] task is to create flashcards: Students put the word and a picture on the front, and the definition and explanation of the picture on the back. Students begin to make their flashcards during this silent working time. I make my way around the room and get to Max. Max always looks like he didn't get enough sleep and always has one earbud in. He rarely has homework done and his face tells you all you need to know about how he feels being in school. Something tells me that Max isn't lost or confused but makes the conscious choice to not do anything in school.

"I'm pleasantly surprised to see Max actually doing his flashcards. He has no pictures on his notecards, just the words. I ask him in a low voice to draw pictures. He looks up at me and



says: ‘Pictures will just confuse me more. Why do we have to draw pictures?’ I respond: ‘Because they help us remember the words.’ Max then says: ‘It doesn’t help me, it makes me more confused. So I don’t see a point in doing it.’ I can tell he isn’t trying to create an argument, but that he genuinely means what he said. ‘Do it for the easy points, then,’ I respond. He looks at me, and then looks down. ‘Shouldn’t learning be more than just getting points?’ I am not prepared for this statement. This statement is everything that *I* believe, value, and cherish. Learning is not about points.

“I smile at Max, feeling flustered by our exchange, and say, ‘Yes, yes you’re right.’

“This moment, which is the longest conversation I have had with Max, leaves me reflecting on my own teaching philosophy and values. I just used points as a motivator for a student to do something. I do not believe that learning is a numbers game. I did not become a teacher because I liked giving grades. It was never about that for me. In fact, my goal as a teacher is to teach my students that the importance of learning lies in the meaning we make from it. If I could, I would hand out A’s like free pencils. I respect and value everyone equally and don’t like that these numbers are creating more of a barrier for these students to gain meaningful learning experiences. Points are not everything, I know this to be true.

“But what do you do when the answer to ‘*Why are we doing this?*’ is not totally apparent?”

### **Kate, Dreaming**

I rarely know that I am dreaming, but I do now. I am walking through a school that looks like Elm Ridge High School, but I don’t think it can be. I think I must be east of Elm Ridge, in the inner-city. Class is in session so the hallways are relatively empty, but they are not the waxy

bright and bare hallways of Elm Ridge. Lightbulbs are out. Lockers are broken. Graffiti climbs from floors laced with leaves and litter. A squirrel shoots past.

It seems impossible, but through the window of a classroom door, I see my daughter's teacher, Julie, at work. Inside, the classroom is bright—a Matisse paper cut of a classroom, all color and care. The students are hard at work, with Julie circulating, as gentle and fiercely smart as ever. And yet at my feet the trash is tangling like a tumbleweed soon to take off down the forgotten hallway. Hypnotized by the swirl, I begin to wonder if these hallway images will just become something else sad I have seen, will just become catalogued in a carousel of pictures from the ever more tragic news.

But I don't want to lose this sight. I don't know what I will do with my knowledge of the deplorable state of this school, but I know I can't forget what I am seeing. As if I know I will wake soon, I take out my phone and start taking pictures as fast as I can, trying to create a panoramic view of this nightmare school. While I frantically snap shots, I know I should write about what I am seeing, but I don't know what to write or for whom.

### **Kate at Elm Ridge High School, Observing Sameea**

Sameea has projected graffiti onto the screen at the front of the room. "Graffiti" is accurate but seems insufficient; the image has been painted by a well-known, if anonymous, street artist and depicts a soldier, hands up against a wall, being frisked by a young girl in braids and a pink dress. The image is, of course, an unexpected one, and Sameea is using it to offer her students guided practice at identifying and explaining various types of irony before turning to look for irony in *The Crucible*. I have always admired the work of this street artist, secretly

jealous of the clarity of his vision and the clear power of his painting. Sameea's students seem to admire the painting, too, and seem to enjoy discussing its purpose.

Then it is on to *The Crucible*. Sameea models working with the non-visual text, calling on specific students to contribute interpretations of passages, then puts students in pairs for more independent practice. She is about to begin circulating then catches herself, saying, "There should be no Chromebooks out or phones—just *The Crucible* and your packets."

I can tell Sameea is taking our last conference to heart; she is inviting more students' voices and trying to set clear behavioral expectations. Still, as she tours the classroom, she checks in with a student yet says nothing about the earbud he is wearing as they talk. And she seems unaware of the Chromebook tuned not to the struggle between John Proctor and Abigail Williams but to a wrestling match. Should I care? At each stop, Sameea speaks at length with a student, looks in his eyes, asks follow-up questions. When I can hear, they don't seem to be talking about irony but about how the student is doing—in class, in life. I find myself typing, "What's the most important curriculum here?"

### **Sameea, Elm Ridge High School, Student Teaching Journal**

"I created an assignment out of a [newspaper] article about ISIS and Islamic extremism. Students read through the news article, annotate it thoroughly, and then answer questions regarding the topic being discussed. Then, they have to take a position on an issue and write about their argument. My hope is that now that we have finished [*The Crucible*] we can really talk about the big issues being presented to us in the story and how they relate to our world today. Talking about ISIS is not an easy thing to do. It requires some level of courage and defiance, and I am aware of that. Still, I feel responsible for bringing in my narrative as a

Muslim-American who denounces any kind of heinous violence. I took [the assignment packets] home and graded them. Ezra is in my almost-dead first period class and is a student who often has his hood up and his head down. He does not participate and usually is a distraction to the others around him. Looking through Ezra's annotations, I became so excited. [Students] were to merely annotate the article, which included text-to-text, text-to-world, and text-to-self connections. However, I did not specify to look out for anything related to *The Crucible*. Ezra's annotations were nothing but connections to Puritanical Salem. He underlined 'Muslims who did not agree with his teachings were excommunicated or killed in an effort to purge Islam from what al-Wahhab believed to be unsanctioned innovations' and wrote in the margins: 'Just like with Puritans—If you did not agree with the church, you were hung.' Another line from the text he underlined: 'The flood of petrodollars meant Saudis could invest in institutions that create extreme and conservative religious leaders who helped maintain the Saudi royal family's position of power.' Ezra wrote in the margins—'Court in Salem used witch hunt to maintain power, Saudi royal family uses extremism/ISIS to stay in power.' And these connections were throughout the article.

"The morning after, Ezra was one of the first students to come in. I go to him with his [packet] in hand and say, 'Hey Ezra, I think you have some really great annotations here. Do you mind contributing to the class discussion when we do that today?' He looked surprised, and just nodded his head and took his packet back. Ezra did not have his hood up or his head down in class. When we were in discussion, he contributed thoroughly and it made me very happy. When he spoke, the class listened, because it was not a voice they were used to hearing.

“I ended class with a whip-around [so each student could share] the position they took at the end of their packet: “Does religion corrupt people or do people corrupt religion?” Everyone was so into their responses that I could not even get to everyone by the bell.

“My personal goal is to have more voices, like Ezra’s, in the class. It changes the overall climate of the environment when a student feels like their voice is being heard, especially on a topic that is worth bringing up.

*“Courage prevails!”*

### **Kate, Halloween**

For the first time, my daughter, Rose, doesn’t need me to take her trick-or-treating. She doesn’t go far—just down the block and back, really, so I can still see her from my perch on the front stoop—but she’s got her friends in tow and the neighborhood is theirs. I watch as they zigzag from sidewalk to house and back, sidewalk to house and back—sometimes running (rumors of regular-sized candy bars, no doubt), sometimes slowing to gather and giggle.

This is the first year they are not princesses or witches or animals. They are two vampires, one goth vampire, one pop singer I’ve never heard of, and a Pink Lady from *Grease*. All wear the red lipstick we bought for Rose’s vampire mouth. Rose’s vampire friend wears dotted drips of lipstick blood to her chin, but Rose has insisted on going bloodless. At first, I thought she wanted to stay pretty, princess or no princess, but when she allowed grey eyeshadow *under* her eyes, I realized it was that the sight of blood—on her—scared her.

For the first time, I am home to give out candy rather than leave a bowl on the stoop in hopes that most kids, at least, take just one treat. And, this year, I’ve gone all out—none of that cheap, filler candy no one really wants. No Sweet Tarts or Dum Dums here. I’m in a good

mood, complimenting costumes, calling hello to the parents waiting at the parkway while their toddlers waddle to the house. In between waves of walkers, I tally the year's trends: lots of Hillary and Donald costumes, lots of baseball players (Game 6 of the World Series is tomorrow). I also come to the conclusion that toddlers are going to bankrupt me; their little, meaty hands can't seem to grab just one piece of candy.

We go through a ton of candy in my neighborhood. Indeed, soon the trick-or-treaters are coming in a steady stream. The middle schoolers are out now, so they've joined the elementary kids, but also the cars from Holden have started to arrive. Each year, families from that area of the city just east of us come west to trick-or-treat. Presumably there's more candy here, and safer strolling. In previous years, I sometimes thought I sensed shame from the parents borrowing the neighborhood and sometimes was annoyed at parents who acted like they owned the place. This year, I don't think about it too much, just keep complimenting costumes and calling hello, and it seems like a nice day all around.

I'm enjoying a brief break in the flow, leaning back to look at the red-tinged cirrus clouds in the darkening sky, when I hear a shrill "Mom!" and am rushed by a nine-year-old vampire and her minions. The girls are terrified and loving it, trying to catch their breaths to tell me what it's all about.

"There's a fortune teller and the head moves!"

"It's so creepy!"

"Do you have a pen? We want to write our fortunes before we forget them!"

I finally make out that our neighbor has placed a fortune teller machine, one like "Zoltar Speaks" from the movie *Big*, in her front yard. Indeed, it seems I have Zoltar to thank for my little break; a crowd is forming down the block.

“I got to go twice,” Rose is telling me as her friends circle a few steps away.

“How’d you manage that?”

“She’d just brought it out so no one else was there yet.”

“Lucky. So what are your fortunes?” I ask, happy to have Rose to myself for a minute on a day that used to be ours.

“The first time it said, ‘Take Caution. You know what I speak.’

“Creepy,” I say, trying to sufficiently appreciate the Halloween horror of it all.

“I know, right? The second time, it said something like I will have a fortune but not all fortune means money.”

“True that.”

“*Mom.*” Rose gives me the look that says, What does that even mean?

I give Rose a quick kiss on her vampire lips then gently push her to make way for a trick-or-treating family evidently uninterested in having their fortunes told. The kids aren’t wearing costumes and even the mom comes forward for candy, taking a few seconds to pick a favorite. They don’t speak and neither do I, distracted by the other girl vampires heading my way.

“They weren’t even wearing costumes!” the bloody-mouthed vampire proclaims as the family continues to the next house. “They shouldn’t get candy!”

“Well, you’ve certainly gotten too much,” I say, pretending to struggle to lift her bag. “Time for sorting and trading!”

Rose starts to lead the way inside and I call out after them, “You can spread out on the floor of the guest bedroom—but close the door so the dog doesn’t get any chocolate! Just cheese for pizza, right?”

“Right!” they all chime as they march to count their loot.

And as I turn to see the next trick-or-treaters approaching, another family from Holden, I hope they haven't heard me. Guest bedroom. Pizza. Never mind that the guest room doubles as an office and is in the basement of the smallest house on the block. Never mind that I've got a coupon for the pizza and will have my husband pick it up to avoid the delivery charge. I have a fortune, I remind myself, and sometimes fortune means money. I have another fortune, too, I know, thinking of the smiling Rose downstairs. I hold out the candy bowl, encouraging the kids to take two because I'm headed in for the night. When a gleeful shriek erupts down the block—Zoltar speaks—the kids' mom and I both jump, then share a knowing look and then a small smile.

### **Kate at Elm Ridge High School, Observing Sameea**

Today is my last observation as well as election day. The class has moved on from *The Crucible* to a rhetoric unit, and Sameea has designed an opening activity that invites students to identify the rhetorical appeals at work in Trump's and Clinton's campaign slogans. Elm Ridge is a notoriously politically active town, and these students—raised here—are interested in analyzing “Make America Great Again” and “Stronger Together.” Though the town leans left, Sameea has told me there are Trump supporters in the class, too, but during the activity I find it hard to tell who students are for. As they talk, Sameea wears a subtle smile, no doubt proud that she's led students to think with their brains, not their emotions, during this divisive election.

Despite the energy of election day and students' interest in the activity, there is something restrained about the proceedings. On paper, everything looks good: there are more voices in the room, and Sameea is expertly conducting them. She tosses a stuffed animal to the student whose turn it is to speak, then catches it when the student is done. All is very orderly: no



cross-talk, no earbuds. Sameea and a few students share a laugh when her lob to a student in the back of the room widely misses its mark, but then it is back to business.

As Sameea transitions students to partner work, she outlines which materials they should have on their desks before picking up her copy of the seating chart. At my suggestion, she circulates with the chart in hand, making sure to check that she *sees* each student and that he or she is on task. She does the job well, but I can tell she feels teaching is becoming too much of a *job*: routines she needs to establish, behaviors she has to monitor, points she has to tally, bells she has to listen for. When the bell rings, she hasn't been able to get to every student, but how could she?

### **Kate and Sameea, Student Teaching Seminar**

It's been a week since the election, and Sameea's classmates, the other student teachers with whom I work, are still shell-shocked. Their mostly Mexican-American students are afraid of deportation and are doubting the power of democracy. Their students are doubting everything their teachers have told them about what is necessary to succeed.

"We had peace circles instead of class," one tells me, explaining that it was her mentor teacher's idea.

"My mentor teacher said to just stick with the plan and not mention the election at all," another says.

Neither is sure she's doing the right thing.

"We've *got* to give them a place to talk," Sameea insists. She went to an Islamic school the day after elections to lead a peace circle in a friend's classroom.

I tell them what I've just read in the news, that the mayor has promised the city will always be a sanctuary city. Then I get out the leftover Halloween candy I've brought: fuel for my students to get through the next two hours of working on a tedious teacher assessment portfolio before they go home to grade homework and papers. My students take happy refuge in the Kit Kats and the Starbursts and the mayor's promise, but as we settle into work, I know we are all wondering how much safety and support our city and classrooms can provide.

### **Kate, Teaching Conference**

We aren't sure what to do with ourselves. The talk, which began at 7:30 p.m., was supposed to go until 9:00. Here it is, 8:00, and Ta-Nehisi Coates has just said "Thank you" and left the stage. His conclusion was neither abrupt nor graceless, which makes us all the more confused. What just happened here?

When the clapping starts to die down, a group behind me, on the balcony, tries to get it going again. They hoot and holler as if speakers at teaching conferences typically do encores. The crescendo is short-lived. Who are they kidding?

Some young women to my right are rehashing the talk, blaming the short program on the interviewer, a white man who told Coates he could really relate to his fear for his son, the kind of fear only a father can have.

"Did he even *read* the book?" one wonders.

Another excitedly remembers, "He did say, 'When I was *looking* through your book.'"

"Some English teacher."

All of the young women shake their heads, disappointed.

In the buzz around me, a consensus is growing: embarrassment. We are embarrassed Coates might have taken the interviewer as representative of the rest of us. *We* aren't so insensitive to think that we can understand what it's like to worry for a black son's safety. (We are mostly white.) *We* would not have implied that a father fears more for a son than does a mother. (We are mostly women.) *We* would not have asked questions that made Coates have to merely repeat what he'd written in the book. (We try to push our students beyond recall, with higher order thinking questions.) *We* would have asked Coates to further unpack the passage in *Between the World and Me* where he writes that "it does not matter that the 'intentions' of individual educators were noble." (We have noble intentions and want to know what better to *do* with them.)

I stand up to join my colleagues in the aisle and, as we make our way to the exit, we share relief that the interviewer at least asked about Trump's election. I look to my notes to get Coates' response right then read out, "I was shocked that I was shocked." This quiets us until we exit the conference center and a slap of cold, 40 degrees colder than when we'd arrived two days before, awakens our conversation. Why were we so shocked at a successful racist campaign after an Obama presidency? Had we forgotten how powerful "the force of anti-black racism" has been in American history, as Coates had reminded us? Were we underestimating the effect of centuries of racist policies, in a country whose deadliest conflict was a civil war over race, when we brought our good "intentions" to the classroom.

When I get back to my hotel room, I am determined to finally finish Coates' book, which I've brought with me in anticipation of his talk. Before long, I suspect this goal is futile, at least for tonight. Every few pages, I stop and think for a while. It's that kind of book. Here, Coates is writing that, as a young man, neither school nor religion could tell him how the "fear [that] ruled

everything around him” was connected—as he knew it was—“to the Dream out there, to the unworried boys, to pie and pot roast, to the white fences and green lawns nightly beamed into our television sets.” It was writing, which his mother had taught him to do, that helped him “see beyond the scramble of each day.” By “writing,” he clarifies, he does not mean “simply organizing a set of sentences into a series of paragraphs, but organizing them as a means of investigation.” I sigh with the knowledge that I don’t see much writing of this kind in schools, and my mind begins a Powerpoint presentation of the paragraph templates in vogue—C.E.R. (for claim-evidence-reasoning), MEL-Con (for main idea-evidence-link)—templates not meant to dissuade interrogation but dissuading it none-the-less. Forms without inspiring function. Forms most often employed in minority and urban schools.

To interrupt this mind loop, I turn back to my notes from Coates’ talk. I’ve written: “It’s corrupting to think about what the reader’s going to get out of it.” The interviewer had asked Coates what he hoped readers would take from *Between the World and Me* and Coates had explained that all he could do was what he did best—write—and that our reading of his book was ours to have. I think of how, despite his dismissal of the general reader, Coates is not contradicting the emphasis we English teachers place on audience—he was writing to his son, after all, not us. I think, too, of how writing is not what the typical student feels he does best. Still, it is what I am beginning to believe (to hope) I do best, so I fall asleep emboldened, ready to trust my writer-self as I tackle the unconventional dissertation format I’ve successfully proposed to my advisors. I wake only once in the night but can tell it’s been a worried sleep. As I watch the circling lights of a ferris wheel far below my hotel window, I wonder if I am ready to trust high school writers. Am I ready to fight for the time and space for them to see what they can learn about themselves and the world through writing?

## **Sameea, Elm Ridge High School, Student Teaching Journal**

“My final division meeting was last Wednesday. I came in late because I had to drop my brother off at his work so I could use his car. [My mentor teacher] texted it was going to be a ‘chill day’ so I was not too worried. When I got to the room, I saw that everyone was eating pie and reading aloud poetry. What a nice way to spend my final moments with this division. Each teacher took turns reading a poem, in no particular order, about no particular topic. I had absolutely nothing on my mind but the heavy hammer of the [teacher assessment portfolio to be completed], so this was a nice way to silence the chaos in my head for a brief moment. Pies. Poems. Snaps. Steve Carlson begins his poem and says, ‘I dedicate this one to Sameea, who is here to remind us why we are all here.’ It was the poem ‘Did I Miss Anything?’ by Tom Wayman. I remember this poem from [Kate’s] class, and how much I loved it. He reads the poem and everyone snaps.

“At the end of the meeting, Steve comes over to me and says something I will never forget. He has a class in my room everyday right after my first period, so he is a strong observer to say the least. He sits in front of me and tells me that these past few months, he has been seeing how students act with me and that he is so inspired by what he sees. He tells me there are people in this profession, even in this building and maybe in this division, who struggle to feel personally invested in what they do. They are never able to establish that relationship with their students. He watches me everyday sloppily packing up my things and trying to scurry out of the room as swarms of students come to talk to me. But he tells me that he sees how much my students respect and care about me as a teacher. He says I reminded him every day why he was

in this profession to begin with, that it all starts with the students. He tells me that I have something special and that my students will always value the time we had learned together.

“As I leave the door, I am handed two envelopes, each with a card inside filled with well wishes from every teacher in my department. So much encouragement, optimism and validation. I still remember my first division meeting and feeling so out of place and obviously *not* a teacher. Today, these veteran teachers told me that they learned something from me.

“And that is the beauty of this profession.”

### **Sameea and Kate, An Elm Ridge Cafe**

**Sameea:** This [the tape recorder being turned on after many minutes of casual visiting] is strange.

**Kate:** I can turn it off so you don't see it.

**Sameea:** No, no, no.

**Kate:** It's so weird, I know.

**Sameea:** It *is* weird because I'm all done [with student teaching]. Do I have anything left in there? (*laughs*)

**Kate:** Well, if you remember, so much of what I'm writing about is how we become the teachers we become, but also how that changes and, so, you always have it in there because you're always you becoming, right? So I was just struck: [When you came into the cafe just now], you said that you kind of feel like you need to get a job to make some money, but you kind of don't want to rush into that yet because you have things you want to do.

**Sameea:** Yeah.

**Kate:** So what are you thinking of when you say that? What would you do instead this semester?

**Sameea:** I don't know. I guess I realized through student teaching that when you're teaching that is a life commitment. (*laughs*) And that's not a bad thing necessarily, but it totally does take over your life. Like, my family was impacted by it. I had my [sibling] sit down and have a talk with me. Like, you know, it's really not pleasant in the house anymore, and it's taking a toll on your relationship with blah, blah, blah. He's really sweet, and we're really close— so it was not like a bad thing—

**Kate:** He was concerned.

**Sameea:** Yeah, he was concerned. So there was a lot of impact that it had, and I guess realizing that I was like, All right, before I go into doing it for realz, you know, I need to take some time for myself, do the things that I want to do—and by that I mean like volunteer stuff, you know, the organizations that *I* really admire, just do *something* with them so I feel like I was a part of it, you know? Um, and also just kind of like figure out who *I* am, too, and do some self-searching and read and write and cater to my creativity also. Pick up some new hobbies, maybe learn an instrument. (*laughs*) Because I don't want to be someone who went straight from college to work and just grind, grind, grind.

**Kate:** I have so many follow-up questions. ...So, writing. Obviously, that's a special interest of mine, of ours. We met each other in a writing class. We both enjoy writing. Where do you leave this [student teaching] experience thinking about writing in curriculum?

**Sameea:** (*laughs*) Um, the writing was not, well, it was kind of different from what I grew up doing in English class.

**Kate:** Which was what?

**Sameea:** Well, I wasn't in Honors or A.P. or anything like that, but this College Prep level class was very structured in terms of writing. And I think they needed that, looking back and

understanding the thought process behind each C.E.R. You know, they add a paragraph, and then they add another one, and the idea is that it gets better and better until you have an entire paper, you know? So I can understand that and I can respect that, if it works for them.

**Kate:** (*laughs*)

**Sameea:** (*laughs*) It's not really my cup of tea, but—

**Kate:** Why not, though? I wanna push you to kind of—

**Sameea:** Because when I was sitting down and helping them, I wasn't helping them write—I didn't feel like I was helping their writing. I was helping them stick words into like a puzzle, I felt like. It felt weird.

**Kate:** So you say: In hindsight, I guess they needed that. What could have been an alternate approach to help them develop their writing?

**Sameea:** Maybe just meet them where they're *at*, like work with whatever they can write. Cuz there were some writers who were stronger than others, some that didn't need the template, you know? And it was *limiting* for them, and they said that to me, and I didn't know what to tell them. Like, I'm sorry? I don't want to? I can't. This is the way it is. So maybe more brainstorm writing and first draft, second draft, and working with what they—like the writer's work *itself*—instead of just taking something and sticking their work into it, you know? ...I wish I had more student voices and stuff. We had this journal that was used sometimes for bell-ringers and it was just—it sat in their mailboxes and then they would just write a page on a random Wednesday, and then you wouldn't see it or anything—it would just be in [their mailboxes]. It was just like for the sake of [sticking] creative writing in there, but it didn't feel like it was part of the class at *all*. I definitely would have a much bigger creative writing [component] or, like you said, bring



in [students'] own voice[s] and [their] own experiences. Yeah, I would—like that was sort of in the C.E.R.s with the "So What?" Paragraph, you know? But it was like a sentence or two.

...

**Kate:** You talked about wanting to read and write [before you get a teaching job]. Do you have a list of things you wanna get to?

**Sameea:** That book that I just told you about, that I just got on the mail (*Muslim Cool: Race, Religion, and Hip-Hop in the United States*). I wanna do some mapping out of curriculum stuff, cuz sometimes when I see something that I'm excited about I just wanna write it down, you know? I don't know if [the curriculum will] ever become a reality, but I like to think it will.

(*laughs*) Especially in today's time, with all the issues that we're experiencing, what we need to prepare ourselves for, as citizens—like how to deal with this polarizing thing of fake news, you know? And just how everyone is in their bubbles. That's a huge thing. How do we counter that? Um, so designing curriculum that—like you were just talking about, different perspectives and showing [students] that they can get information from *multiple* places. The truth is so muddled today. It's so muddled, and that's horrible, and it's a weird time for young people to grow up in, I think. So I gotta (*laughs*), I gotta do some writing and thinking about stuff. I have some ideas.

They're up there. (*laughs*)

**Kate:** And I think that will be really *great* for you—to do some meaning-making for yourself—but I think that'll also be the kind of thing that other people could benefit from reading. And I, it's funny—the writing I'm doing—in a way, I can just put it in a drawer, get my PhD and be done, right?

**Sameea:** (*laughs*) Yeah.

**Kate:** But at the same time, when I have shared it—like [a colleague] read some stuff last semester and he was like, I would use this in my course. I think it would be provocative. You know?

**Sameea:** What?! Nice.

**Kate:** And so I just encourage you to remember that, when you think maybe you'll do some bell-ringers for yourself. (*laughs*) Right? But what is a way to share these thoughts? Because people need to hear them and not forget what's going on. ...I was thinking, too, about, a narrative you wrote about thinking of the classroom as a sanctuary. You had a Muslim student who you felt like you could relate to in terms of not quite having a place here. I wondered if you had any more thoughts over the semester on the classroom as a sanctuary or. . . or if that's just what it is.

**Sameea:** Yeah, that's what it is. The classroom was always more than just a classroom to me, and I also realized that I was more than a teacher, too. My role was more than just, I'm going to tell you things, you know? I don't know why I am that way. I was thinking a lot about this, like why is it that I want to connect with people on a level that—like who they are, what they need? Why do I always want to offer something to them? That's weird, right? I'm supposed to teach them. That's it, right? It's a strange thing to reflect on, but I guess, I guess I'm always looking for each individual and their needs. And sometimes I feel like that becomes my main concern, you know? And that's not—I don't know if that's a good thing. I don't know.

**Kate:** So you're worried that you care too much about the human and not enough about their skills.

**Sameea:** Yeah. (*laughs*)

**Kate:** You always apologize for it as if it's strange that you'd want to connect with people more than anything. Right?

**Sameea:** Yeah. I mean, it's not a bad thing, but it's kind of a weird feeling to say that, I guess. I don't know. ...My biggest fear [is getting into a routine and never coming out of it]. That's one of the reasons why I'm like, Is teaching for me? Because I don't want to just become someone that does the same thing again and again. It's scary.

**Kate:** So you have to be present like you are right now. What's going on in the news? What's going on in culture? What's going on in the neighborhood? But I think you're saying, Am I going to have energy to always do that and be reading outside materials and be attuned.

**Sameea:** Yeah. Cuz there's so much more. As much as I don't want to admit it, there's so much that fills up the classroom time and space and energy. There's so much just bleh stuff—well, to me, it's bleh stuff. To somebody it's important and you have to make time for it, but, literally, there's *no* time for anything, and I don't know. It's just like. . .

**Kate:** In any of the schools you've been in or with any of the mentors you've been with have you ever felt more space or air, or does it just seem like it's the way of the profession?

**Sameea:** Well, obviously some more than others. There was definitely space in [the class we observed for your Teaching of Writing course]—that was really nice for me to see. That was refreshing. But the profession *is* a little bit like that, because you have to do your job, you know? It's not like, Let's just hang out. It's a job. There're expectations and [the students are] in school—they're not in some wellness program. They *are* in school. They need to learn. I understand that. So it can get that way—it is the nature of the profession—but I think there is a way to kind of strike a balance between the two. I just fear, I just fear it so much. I'm just really nervous about that.

**Kate:** I have to say that you're—I feel like you have a little bit of post-traumatic stress disorder.

**Sameea:** (*laughs*)

**Kate:** (*laughs*) Which I think I totally did. When I stopped teaching high school, I think I spent the first couple *years* after that resenting the heck out of the profession for being so impossible. I was like, How could I do it the way I know how to do it and be present to all of those young people and still be a mother, still be a wife, still be a writer, still be myself. Impossible! That's what I decided. I was so angry, you know. And since then I've spent a lot of time knowing myself better, like you say. And knowing, okay, well, part of it is that I have my body issues where I have to sleep for nine hours or my back is a wreck, and I could not do that in the set up I was in. So, making better choices for myself. But part of it, too, is like, whether it's through my daughter's school or whatever, exploring other ways of structuring education, you know? And trying not to give up on it, but to keep thinking about it, writing about it, exploring it. When people do the whole, you-have-summertime-off thing, I didn't really because I used that time to reevaluate and think about who I wanted to be in that space and how I was going to change it and to *do* the reading and to *do* writing and, I mean, that's why you need that time.

**Sameea:** Yeah.

...

**Kate:** Anyway, as I've been writing—especially during your last semester—about my own teaching, my own life, but also that includes going to see you, going to Elm Ridge, which is the site of *my* growing up—you know, as I said I moved here from a place where I was the only white girl in school—and I found that *so* much of what I'm writing about has to do with race and has to do with boundaries and borders and whiteness and not-so-whiteness (*laughs*), and I watched you, before, kind of identify as brown but then identify as different than—like, I feel like I've seen you go through different levels of: Okay, in this community I'm this. Like, at [the university] I'm this. But in Elm Ridge now there's all of these other—do you know what I mean?

**Sameea:** Yeah.

**Kate:**—like west side [of the city] black is very different than even suburban black.

**Sameea:** Yeah.

**Kate:** I've seen you kind of grapple with what is my place when I'm in that. And I'm just curious—as frank as you can be—what has that experience left you thinking about who it is to be you in a classroom, who it is to be you in relation to students? How much does *what* matter in your thinking through that now, or in your feeling through that now?

**Sameea:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Kate:** Does that make any sense whatever?

**Sameea:** No, it does. No, it's so interesting that you said you're thinking a lot about race right now, too. Cuz that's something that I'm definitely thinking a lot about, too. I learned a lot about—well I don't know if I can say that I *learned* (*laughs*), but I definitely did some exploring of that topic in this last semester. Well, for one, I wasn't around a lot of white communities at all. Like this was my first time being in a majority white population, so, um—

**Kate:** What about where you grew up, though?

**Sameea:** I'm talking about teaching-wise.

**Kate:** Oh, teaching-wise. Oh, okay, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Sameea:** And I think that's significant—mentioning where I went to school—because that kind of like pre-conceived notion wasn't a healthy one to have either, you know? Like this is how *all* white people are. (*laughs*) But I did a lot of growing and learning, I think, about race because of the fact that I saw—there was so much courageous conversation happening *within* [Elm Ridge High School]. Our department was talking about race, but also with my students. Having white students was interesting because there were certain students that were extremely interested in

talking about whiteness, and that I connected with on a really deep level, that were white. I'm thinking about one student in particular who, after our first peace circle, came in during his lunch period to talk to [my mentor teacher] and I joined in later because I wasn't sure if I was part of the conversation, but he had his reservations about the whole thing. You know, the peace circle didn't feel authentic, and people are not going to be themselves. They're not going to speak from the heart. He was just talking about that. And he also had some criticisms about how the class seemed really structured and rigid. And [my mentor teacher] had this long explanation about [how] everything she does is for a reason. She had this really eloquent speech about how race plays a factor in all things in the classroom and students of color experience bias when it comes to grading ... And so he was just listening so intently and so humbly. And at the end of it, he was so profoundly affected by what she said, and he just kept apologizing to her and apologizing to me and telling us we're doing such a great job and he was just like, You know I have a lot of personal guilt about being white. And I want to know that I can do what I can to help fix this and make things better for people. And so that was, for me, really moving. And he's a very empathetic type of person, and he is—for some people, it could be an uncomfortable topic to talk about, especially if you're white. But he was the one who was really interested in talking about it, and then even after that he's had very introspective, deep conversations with me about race and religion. He's like, Oh, I know all this stuff about Islam; I took this class last year. And he was telling me the five pillars and stuff, and I was like, Who *are* you? It was the strangest thing ever. And so I never expected for it to come from a white student, but I ended up having my most interesting conversation about race with a *white* kid. And I don't know if I ever wrote about him in my [student teaching journal], but like the conversations we had—and he's so interested in *my*

culture and *my* religion, too, and he even—this is the student who came to [our university] for an event.

**Kate:** Right, right, right.

**Sameea:** And he like sat—he sat in the circle—the way that they do it it's called “the station,” and they sit on the floor, cuz that's traditional—you sit on the floor on the carpet and you have this conversation and it's this really kind of intimate thing, with a group of people that know each other. And like a *stranger* from Elm Ridge coming to [the university], taking the [subway] himself—and I was in class, I wasn't there to help him. He found his way and was sitting there for like an hour and a half with people he doesn't even know and was just like listening—

**Kate:** That sounds so Elm Ridge to me though.

**Sameea:** (*laughs*)

**Kate:** (*laughs*) Right?

**Sameea:** That's true! The reason why he came was cuz he actually told me to come to this race circle thing that was happening in Elm Ridge and I couldn't come but I was like, You should come to this! And he actually did. And it was just really moving, though, for *me*. I walked into the lounge where it was being held and I was just like (*lowering voice to whisper*) he was the only white kid there. It's all these brown people and Arab people and he just stood out *so* much. And I was just like, This is *so*—a 16 year old kid? Really? Like, no, you're the *most* insecure; you don't want to be the only anything. I was so moved by that. I was so incredibly moved. And so I just like—I don't know—with all the conversation that we were having as a department—you know, I learned a lot about how when you start getting fixated on identity politics, the white person's always wrong. It's like—the thing that I wrote about in my [student teaching journal]—right versus wrong, white versus black. It's like so much more nuanced than that, and I think *I*

grew a lot as a person about how, you know, everyone needs to be on the same page working together. And even if we're not on the same page, nobody's *enemies*. And we know how the whole creating lines between us, where that got us—as divided as you can imagine. It cannot be that way. And when we're talking about race it cannot be in a divisive way. It cannot. It has to be common ground. It has to be respectful. It has to be coming from a place of love and understanding, not from a place of, Let me just antagonize, you know? And that's hard to say, because there was so much about me that was like: You have to be unapologetic when it comes to race. You know? And I still feel that way. But there's also a lot of harm that's coming from our, from *how* we're talking about it, I think. So, I don't know. It's like, I'm definitely like developing still—

**Kate:** Can you say more of what you mean with that: harm from *how* we're talking about it?

**Sameea:** Well, I kind of think about what happened in my department, you know? When you invite someone to take initiative when it comes to race, and it comes from this place of: Let me tell you all the things that *you* are. Right? That can be hurtful and harm—and it can actually *burn* bridges rather than create some kind of dialogue. So it's counter-productive. It's counter-productive. I don't know if I wrote about this, but the guy who led the initiative [at my first Elm Ridge department meeting], he put me in the Racially Conscious group. So in theory, I'm like, if I were to pick sides, I was on that side, you know? But I can't be there either, because it's not—even as a country we're not going to get anywhere if we approach it in that way.

**Kate:** Did that student break some biases you might have had or prejudices or preconceived notions or—

**Sameea:** Yeah, definitely.

**Kate:** Like what?



**Sameea:** The student that came [to the event at the university]?

**Kate:** Yeah.

**Sameea:** Yeah—like crazy! So much. That was so profound for me. Like *so* profound. I just would assume that nobody that wasn't a minority would ever care to even understand or experience—

**Kate:** So what do you make of *me*? (*laughs*) You know what I mean?!

**Sameea:** (*laughs*) Yeah. I guess I have, I mean, I don't know. You're the exception. (*laughs heartily*)

**Kate:**(*laughs*) You don't have to—

**Sameea:** No!

**Kate:**—say that either.

**Sameea:** No, no! It's not like I'm not friends with white people or anything like that. It's not like that. It's just the bias is there. It's there. Even if it's hidden. Even if it's not like overt. Even if it's not like—it's not like you hate an entire race or anything like that—

**Kate:** Yeah, you don't understand how they could feel.

**Sameea:**—it's like you have a bias though. You know, just like any other bias. And that's part of my learning was that a bias is a bias. I need to call out my bias where it is. You know? I have a bias against white people.

**Kate:** Yeah.

**Sameea:** And I need to see it for what it is. And I think the dialogue can get very much that way when you're going to a school like [our urban university] or when you're in an environment like [the city]. It can get very us versus them. And it's easy to just join that. But I think there's a reason why I went to Elm Ridge. There's a reason why I had a group of students that was

different from what I was used to. It's the reason why I went to a school that talked about race. It's cuz it's all a part of my journey in understanding what the role of race is and what the right approach is to solving it, you know? The right approach isn't us versus them. It *can't* be that.

...

**Kate:** Okay. So I suppose my last questions for you would be, Where do you want to teach now?

**Sameea:** I don't know. . . . I've been like really dreading that question, because I genuinely don't know. I really don't know. Everything was kind of—I mean student teaching at Elm Ridge kind of threw everything off.

**Kate:** Aaah, sorry.

**Sameea:** (*laughs*) Nah, it's okay. I'm so grateful for it. I could honestly make the most of any environment. I know that I can. Ideally, I would love to teach in the city, but I don't think that's going to happen—

**Kate:** Because of [the residency requirement]?

**Sameea:** Because of [the residency requirement] and also my mom's not a fan of that idea. She wants me to work in a suburban school. She thought Elm Ridge was super far, and I'm like: It's a suburb, technically. But, she wants me to be close by.

**Kate:** Is she worried about safety or just distance, or both?

**Sameea:** I think it's distance more so than safety. She doesn't really know about the city.

...

**Kate:** You should eat a little.

**Sameea:** I'll take a bit of [the scone].

**Kate:** It's cornmeal, so if you don't like cornmeal you're in trouble.

**Sameea:** We'll find out.

**Kate:** Oh, it's 2:00. They close at 2:00. (*chewing*) So you don't know where you're going to apply, huh?

**Sameea:** No. . . I'm gonna work as a sub though.

**Kate:** Oh yeah?

**Sameea:** At Elm Ridge.

**Kate:** At Elm Ridge?

**Sameea:** Yeah.

**Kate:** Really? I didn't know that.

**Sameea:** Yeah. [My mentor teacher] is already like, Are you available on the 25th?

**Kate:** How nice!

**Sameea:** She and I decided that whenever she's going to be out I'm going to come in. ...It should be fun. [And] I think part time is good for me right now. I think that's the perfect amount I need. It's a little bit where I can see my kids—like, How're you doing? Good? Cool. ... Is it time for us to go?

**Kate:** I think so.

## **PART TWO**

### **JOHN**

## I.

We have helped make the world in which we find ourselves. We are not merely objective inquirers. . . we are complicit in the world we study.

—D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*

Though it has been almost five years since I resigned from Barnard High School, walking into it now feels eerily natural. Is *this* muscle memory, this way my body steers me down halls and around corners to my old classroom, across from which my university student, John, is student teaching? I have arrived early so keep walking and, though I know why I'm here, I feel like I'm on my way to make copies during my planning period or to the faculty lounge to make a parent call. Muscle memory wins and I head to the empty lounge and go to the bathroom even though I don't really have to; with so few breaks in the high school day, you use a bathroom when you can. I remember the crooked latch on the left stall door, the candy smell of the hand soap, the feel of the linoleum counter as I wipe down the sink's inevitable splash. And I begin to wonder if the past five years ever happened, if I'd fallen asleep at my desk and only dreamed I'd left this place. But then the spell is broken. As I reach for the door, a poster on it tells me that all is not as it was: here, "The Formative Seven"—seven cartoon superheroes—give me "seven strategies of assessment for learning." The buff "Goal Guard," with Norse helmet and clenched right fist, looks out at me and asks, "Where Am I Now?"

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Now, I am sitting in the back of my former colleague's classroom, watching John student-teach A.P. Language and Composition. He begins class by inviting students to present yesterday's small-group work: presentation abstracts for an imagined academic conference on Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*.

It's strange to see John at home in my old home, stranger still to see him at home in this sea of suburban students after all his talk of urban education and teaching for social justice. But John would be the first to tell me that it shouldn't be surprising that he—or I—gravitated toward what is familiar. (Both John and I grew up in the suburbs.) Indeed, though he feels like many people hate it when he says so, John suspects the primary reason he chose teaching is because he comes from a family of teachers. (His late mother was a teacher and an older sibling is one.) "That's life," John wants to tell those disappointed by what seems a passive reason for entry into the profession, "people influencing you." In fact, when I interviewed him for my study on teacher identity development, John said he is certain that having a teacher-mother influenced him: "It for one thing has led my family to really value education." And he believes that he was "deeply impacted" by how much his mother "cared" for her students and "*loved* her job."

As John described his mother's devotion to her special education students, he was wary of "elevat[ing]" her to "savior" status, though he clearly admires her patient persistence despite scratches and bruises at the hands of her students with severe cognitive impairment. To be sure, though John's mom died in his early adolescence, he has retained a sense of teaching's challenges when he might have glorified her profession as he mourned her. For example, he recalls his mother having to spend hours of class time administering paper tests that her special education students could not read or understand and that gave no true indication of their skill

level. And from watching his mother and his sister at work, he has a good idea of the hours teachers actually put into their jobs. John believes knowing the realities of an educator's life has put him at an advantage both in the classroom and on the job search; he has seen relief in a new mentor's eyes when he says he is "from a family of teachers." He knows what he is in for.

That said, John expects that his high school classroom experiences will also be quite different from his mother's and sister's experiences in an elementary setting. Because of this departure from the family norm, John feels very much his own teacher. Though John knows his sister is a "socially conscious person," it is he who has a "burning desire" to bring a "social justice element into the classroom" and who believes that goal will be better met in higher grades: "...it's a lot easier to talk about systematic oppression with high schoolers than with fourth graders."

And, sure enough, right now John's students are sharing presentation abstracts clearly influenced by feminist theory. John smiles as students read aloud, and I can tell that he is momentarily in heaven; he's always wanted to teach *The Awakening* and here it is: the first required text of his teaching career.

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Like John, I student taught at Barnard. The first time I stepped foot in the high school, I was all nerves, about to meet a mentor who'd been published in *Poetry* magazine, about to get a stack of books I'd have to begin teaching in just a few weeks. The freedom my mentor offered me in teaching his Creative Writing, World Literature, and Advanced Placement courses was both terrifying and an honor. I remember showing clips from *Blade Runner* during a study of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, having students try out abstract expressionist painting in

conjunction with Camus' *The Stranger*, and assigning excerpts from Studs Terkel's *Race* to accompany our reading of Morrison's *Beloved*. My mentor and I exchanged favorite poems as we developed an author list from which students could choose for an independent study in the Creative Writing course. I spent every evening and weekend moment at home reading and researching; the curricular possibilities were endless.

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In his response to students' *Awakening* abstracts, John applauds thoughtful diction in order to draw attention to the learning target of today's lesson on the opening chapters of *The Great Gatsby*. I internally flinch as I recall the breakneck speed at which I had to get through books here and as I recall "Captain Target" (a rip-off of Captain America, in a sleeveless super suit) from the poster on the bathroom wall. Captain Target likes strong diction.

I also can't help but think of the classroom narrative John wrote for last week's student teaching seminar. John had introduced a Virginia Woolf essay he hoped his students could put in conversation with *The Awakening*. As they discussed the essay, the tone was "sympathetic" until a student, Nate, countered that "'today there aren't any barriers like that for women to express themselves in art.'" And it was on. John narrated the scene:

"I see Samantha's hand shoot up. Our ardent feminist who talks about concepts like intersectionality and heteronormativity with ease, and with a no holds barred attitude, I was certain she would tear into Nate. Out of the corner of my eye I also see Sara, a quieter girl and a student who hasn't spoken yet today. I call on her.

"'I just wanted to disagree with what Nate said. Because, like, if you look at Taylor Swift—'



“The class begins to get rowdy, laughing and talking. I shush them and let Sara finish.

““No, I mean if you look at the way she is treated by the media for writing songs about her boyfriends. People always say she’s so crazy and over-dramatic, so I think that shows the women artists are still judged for how they express themselves. But we don’t treat men who write about their ex-girlfriends like that.’

“I nod. ‘Right, and Taylor Swift has spoken a lot about that, right? She even wrote that song “Blank Space” in response to that criticism.’

““Exactly!’ Sara responds.

“Nate asks for an opportunity to respond. I let him speak, then say Samantha will speak next, letting the class know that only the next three students can talk about Taylor Swift before we return to the novel. ‘But it’s not necessarily because she’s a woman,’ he protests, ‘Like, for example, people really hated Justin Bieber, too!’

“The class bursts into laughter. ‘Hold on, hold on!’ I raise my voice, quieting their responses of why Justin Bieber’s criticism is more justified than Taylor’s. I do chime in myself with, ‘To be fair, Taylor Swift never peed in a mop bucket at a club, but I understand your point about celebrities being criticized. Although I think there’s another commonality between Taylor and Justin. Who is both of their target demographic?’

““Um, I guess teenage girls,’ Nate responds.

“I nod. ‘So maybe the mistreatment of Justin Bieber in the media also relates to the treatment of anything that is associated with teenage girls in particular, and femininity in general.’ The class gives an impressed ‘ooh’ to that analysis.

“I nod to Samantha. ‘I actually don’t want to speak about Taylor Swift. I wanted to talk about Nicki Minaj.’

“‘Yes!’ I respond with a a zest that makes the class laugh, unable to contain my fandom.

“‘Like, she’s criticized for literally everything. And like people are always discrediting her as a rapper, but that verse on “Monster”...’

“‘And,’ I add, ‘Kanye was so intimidated by Nicki’s verse on “Monster” that he almost cut her from the song, just because he was afraid that her verse on that one song would outshine his entire album.’

“‘And it did. Everyone was so scared of her!’ Samantha finishes.

“‘And I think that it’s important to note that the criticism Nicki receives comes specifically from the place of her being a black woman, like we actually saw in the Miley Cyrus incident,’ I add to knowing nods around the room.

“‘Right, because back to what I said about people being scared of her. Like, nobody’s afraid of Iggy Azalea. Nobody’s scared of Eminem,’ Samantha adds.

“‘The room laughs again and I call on Avery, who normally commands the room with her witty and poignant responses, giving her the last word on this portion of the discussion.

“‘So going outside of music. Like, the woman who plays Margo in the *Paper Towns* movie...’

“‘Cara Delevingne,’ I add, glancing back at [my mentor teacher] who seems perplexed about, though not disapproving of, the whole thing.

“‘Yes, exactly. When she was doing press for the movie she got a bad reputation for being mean, but the interviewers were just asking her sexist questions. Like they would ask her *if* she read the book the film was based on. But they would ask her male co-stars *when* they had read the book, implying that they definitely did but she might not have. It’s like as an actress she

wasn't given any respect based on the assumptions those interviewers made, and then she was criticized for being impatient with them!'

“‘Right, I remember when that happened. And I think you're right, it does show the lack of respect women artists are afforded. Now of course when discussing topics of gender inequality, all of these women are multimillionaires, right? They all in some degree come from a privileged place in society. But even though their problems aren't the biggest issue women face compared to poorer women, they're definitely indicative of broader systemic issues. Now,’ I say conclusively, ‘let’s discuss one of our favorite artists, Mademoiselle Reisz [from *The Awakening*]!’

“The students laugh at my less than graceful transition into the book, but they turn to the page in the novel I suggest for close reading, and connect the dialogue in the text back to the Virginia Woolf essay.”

The narrated scene blends into the one before me as John and his students look to their books, now copies of *The Great Gatsby*. I imagine Captain Target keeping watch at the front of the room, arms crossed like a bouncer’s; he likes “close reading” like he likes “diction.” And I imagine a woman in a high-necked librarian’s shirt, mini-skirt, and cape standing just behind John. It is One-Der Woman as depicted on the “Formative Seven” poster, and I suspect that she has just reminded John that “during lessons” he must “focus.”

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In *Counternarratives: Studies of Teacher Education and Becoming and Being a Teacher* (2008), Robert Bullough warns against singular institutional solutions or "best practices" as they "believe the complexity of the processes of teaching and learning" (pp. 2, 3). As a result of the "new

managerialism” of which such solutions are products, Bullough claims, "double-mindedness is becoming a necessary way of life among educators" (p.4), resulting in teachers who "consistently find themselves needing to engage in actions contrary to their most fundamental beliefs about teaching and learning in order to satisfy one or another set of externally imposed mandates" (p. 5). Bullough encourages teachers to "to think more complexly about their practice and the reasons behind their actions" so that they can live and teach "undividedly and fully purposely" (pp. 28, 53).

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As the superheroes of assessment fade from my imagination, I chide myself for trying to set up a grim, Common Core- and assessment-influenced *after* to contrast a supposedly brighter *before*, for even when I didn't have to post the day's objective on the board or enter student scores into a computer at the department's data kiosk, I too made "less than graceful transition[s]" as I tried to teach both what I wanted to and what I thought I had to—or as I tried to uncover every last thing a text had to offer.

My eyes follow John as he circulates between small groups. As so many teachers have done before him, John is helping students assess the reliability of Nick Carraway, the narrator of *The Great Gatsby*. "What does Nick's word choice tell us?" he asks. "What does his diction reveal?" John stops at a group by the door, and my eyes continue past, through the door's window and across the hallway, to take their first peek into my old classroom—one I'm not sure I want. What if it's been drastically changed? What if it looks just the same?

I can't see much, just the backs of students' heads and a clock on the far wall where there didn't used to be one. I think back to my last days in that room, to the happy chaos of my A.P.

students' final presentations. After the May A.P. exam, I'd invited students to use their own experiences and texts of their choice to defend a claim about what it means to be human. Each student had to write his or her own essay but, in presenting ideas to the class, students could team up and use any medium they'd like to either directly communicate their claims or to help the rest of us *experience* what they had come to understand. And so, for the last days of class, we watched student-made movies, created a watercolor quilt, listened to an original composition for saxophone, crafted totems, designed temporary tattoos. There was such noise, such joy.

But talk about a graceless transition. We had spent most of the year at the test-prep grind and then, poof, it was time for personal connection and creativity. Having decided that the burden (once the beauty) of teaching English was that there were so many potential texts to study and so many possible things to learn through them, I had taken comfort in College Board suggested reading lists and requisite skills. So after many semesters of trying to embrace the complexity of the humanities, it was a relief to focus solely on students' skill at close, (New) critical reading. And my students did well on the A.P. exam. Still, the Creative Writing teacher in me couldn't stomach a whole year of I-less literary analysis and figured my students shouldn't. But while students loved the final project's playful presentations, the accompanying narrative analysis essay confused them as much as, if not more than, it engaged them. This alternative approach was too little too late—in the year, for my students, and in my high school teaching career, for me.

Not for the first time, I worry that my jadedness could affect John. Here he is before me, all energy despite the late nights and early mornings. Here he is: excitedly turning the pages of *Gatsby* to join a small group's discussion.

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Back on the bathroom wall, Model Master—who, with his winged helmet, medieval boots, and bow appears to be the lovechild of Thor and Robin Hood—is telling whoever will listen not to forget “Strategy 2: Modeling.”

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I should not be looking at my phone as I observe John teach, but students are writing silently for the next five minutes, coming to post-discussion conclusions. I google the “Formative Seven,” curious about their origins, and learn that the superheroes represent the seven strategies featured in a Pearson-published book by Jan Chappuis. According to one Amazon reviewer, a 6th year teacher, “Every teacher should have this book!” Says a college student reviewer: “Everything in it were facts that I already knew so it was not a very good read.”

As John solicits student volunteers to share their short paragraphs, I put away my phone and begin taking notes with a letter of recommendation in mind: “Though a new teacher, John already knows how to scaffold a lesson to get students to meet the day’s objective. He models, offers opportunities for supported and individual practice, then assesses student learning.” With the post-observation conference in mind, I make myself wonder: At what isn’t John yet a superhero?

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John is wary of the “mask of professionalism” teachers wear. That’s what he told me as we sat in my office a year ago, drinking turtle mochas and talking about what kind of teacher he planned to be. “I want to be a *human*, you know? There’s lots of writing about how teachers sort of wear

this mask of professionalism, and I definitely understand that, but I also think that if you rely too much on that it can put a guard up between you and your students, and students don't respond well to insincerity. So, I kind of want to show that I'm a human and that I'm able to relate to them on a more individual, personal level, because I think that that will make my relationships with my students stronger and, maybe this is just me being idealistic or putting my own experience on everybody else, but I know that I tried harder and was more committed to classes when I felt a personal bond with a teacher, cuz then it wasn't just, like, Okay, well, I'm not going to do this homework assignment because I don't want to, because it was, like, Oh, no. I don't want to let this teacher down who I respect and who I admire and who actually means something to me more than just like a person who I spend an hour with everyday.”

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The hour—really 51 minutes—is now up. John brightly, if a bit stiffly, says goodbye to students as they pass him on the way out the door, and I make a note to ask him how comfortable he feels in his teacher skin. He once told me that, when he was a kid, he cultivated a “scholar” look in an attempt to be seen for his academic strengths. He knows he sometimes still acts the part. Waiting for a university seminar to begin, for example, he sits at attention, eager for the professor’s arrival. He notices that he sits straighter than his peers, dresses more formally. And John finds this demeanor useful for teaching; because he is only a few years older than his students, it’s helpful to look professional—to look like a *teacher*.

John certainly looks like a teacher now: dressed in a button down shirt and sweater vest, he is gathering papers at the front of the room. I take the moment to gather my feedback for our post-observation conference. I’ve made note of some practical strategies he might try—strategies

for eliminating cross-talk, monitoring groups' progress, transitioning between tasks. They are good strategies, but they feel flat, not very *human*. But mustn't we all keep more than one target in our sights?

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My departure from the building feels less automatic than my entry. I walk slowly, enjoying the empty-again halls. When the clock tower bell begins to sound the hour, I even stop to count its chimes, something I have never had the time to do before. As I look out a window into the courtyard, I think about how it sneaks up on you that, though you've been meeting official expectations, you haven't been consistently inviting your students to read their worlds and themselves, much less to write them. Reflecto Man would be proud of me, I think. Just down the hall, on a poster on a bathroom wall, he holds a mirror up near his bald, superhero head and encourages "self-reflection." Reflecto Man stands firm at the bottom of the poster, under his friends who ask "Where Am I Now?" and "Where Am I Going?" Reflecto Man asks me, "How do I Close the Gap?" How do I get from who I am to who I want to be?

The window before me has adhesive vertical stripes on it but no horizontal ones, as if the architect had gotten halfway to colonial charm. As I notice this detail, I remember how at the beginning of each semester I asked my creative writing students to see something in our classroom in a new way, to see with "poet's eyes," and every semester a student described the partitioned windows as prison cells. The implication of the comparison was not lost on me. Today, though, from outside of the classroom and with the spring day shining through the panes, I think the windows look rather pretty.



## II.

Stories are interpretive acts, and they are never single-voiced but instead are dialogical, shaped by previous history, by present emotional and rhetorical context, by the potential listener as well as by the teller.

—Joy S. Ritchie and David E. Wilson, *Teacher Narrative as Critical Inquiry: Rewriting the Script*

Dear John,

You once wrote to me that you are “going into English education more so for [your] love of literature than [your] love of writing,” and I need to tell you I don’t believe you. It’s not that I doubt your love of literature. How could I, given all the times we’ve talked about our shared favorite books (like *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Beloved*) or all the times I have seen you passionately talk about books (like *The Awakening*) with students of your own when you were student teaching? You love literature, yes. But I think your love of writing has undeservedly gotten stuck playing second fiddle.

Let me tell you a story. Last night, my daughter, Rose, and I went to see a youth orchestra perform. The concert featured the winner of the orchestra’s concerto competition: a high school girl playing Glazunov’s Violin Concerto in A Minor. If it weren’t for her ponytail, this girl—with her silver gown and confident nods to the conductor—could have passed for a professional. Her left hand gracefully arced the fingerboard, climbing it with precision. Her right hand was master of the bow, from bouncing staccatos to luxurious legatos. Her vibrato was rich and warm. What got me most was the way she leaned into a crescendo and the force with which she pulled

her bow from the string after that dramatic rise. Despite all that splendor, though, my eyes kept returning to the girl's ponytail. I recalled the program notes and kept thinking: for 50 minutes each day, this virtuoso sits in a suburban high school English classroom. I just couldn't square the girl's shameless expressiveness and confident playfulness with any student I had known (or been).

I realize that such expressiveness and playfulness are not hallmarks of self-conscious adolescence. And yet before me was a large orchestra full of expressive and playful teens, with one stand of violinists continually battling broken bow hairs, so bold was their playing. I couldn't help but think about how, when I played the violin in high school, I had played with no such style, and I began to realize that it was not because I was embarrassed to do so (I had naively thought of a musician's seemingly excess movements as voluntary theater) but because I hadn't *really* studied my instrument. I hadn't come to feel my body's movements as born of music or contributing to it.

The thing is, as a high school student, I *loved* classical music. Deeply. I sometimes put Mendelssohn's violin concerto on repeat before I went to bed. Unsure of God's existence, I thought that a particular five measures from the first movement of Bach's Violin Concerto in E Major were the best evidence in his favor. And so you can imagine that the less-than-celestial sounds emanating from my violin were no small disappointment. Practicing was a frustration, so I did little of it. Eventually, I stopped lessons. But that was after many years of weekly trips to my violin teacher's house, and as I watched the young musicians play with such ownership last night, the teacher in me tried to figure out how all those lessons could have added up to something more.

You might be wondering what this all has to do with writing, or maybe you're beginning to see. Bear with me just a bit longer. I once wrote a description of a typical violin lesson from my childhood, and I've dug it up to share with you:

I bring my violin to be tuned and, while I wait, bring my sheet music to the music stand and switch on the light. Before Ms. Volker gives my violin back to me, she plays the new, harder section of Csardas that we are to start today, and as I follow along on the sheet music, I think: I will do it. I will practice every night, and I will play this. As I listen to the lush song's gypsy swells, the haunting harmonics, I am looking ahead to the car ride home, looking through the window at the forest preserve under the winter moon, imagining I am part of that beauty, seeing myself get home and go up to my room and practice with that blue-black sky twinkling beside me, making music.

But first I am back at Ms. Volker's, trying the new measures, and there seems nothing but scratch. Could there be song? I don't see how. So much else must come first.

"Katie?"

I come back to attention.

"Take it again from the A."

First I must take it from A. First I must practice reaching for a harmonic that seems impossible to reach.

But I didn't practice, and I didn't feel like I had any business playing musically until all was technically correct, which it of course never was because I didn't practice.

I see now that I didn't know *how* to practice. Now that I've watched Rose (who, at nine, has already surpassed me on the violin) strategically attack a troublesome passage, I see that I never knew how to do the same. *I* never made a "practice box," bracketing off a measure that needed extra attention. I never knew to play its notes in various rhythms (to get those notes *in* my fingers) or to try out different quadrants of the bow as I worked to get the now familiar notes up to tempo. To me, practice meant mere repetition—and repetition was boring. It was also no guarantee of improvement.

It's no secret that, these days, many high school students don't get a lot of writing practice, nor is it a secret that there's often more concern for the form of their writing than its musicality. In other words, writing practice is frequently mere repetition. A MEL-Con paragraph is a MEL-Con paragraph, no matter the content. A C.E.R. is a C.E.R. This is how you were able to write, in your literacy autobiography, that you "haven't written much since [you] were little," despite telling me, on another occasion, that you wrote many "expository [and] persuasive academic papers." You didn't *feel* like you'd been writing.

You *did* feel like a writer when you wrote fiction for my course—though not at first. You initially "lacked confidence" and "remembered [your] old faults: forgetting to include vital information, poor character development, and of course rushing to get to the 'good part' of the story." You said your first draft felt "sloppy and inconsistent." But there were many drafts after that one and, by embracing the processes into which I invited you, you learned to not repeat your "old faults." You allowed what you called an "ugly" first draft, then you made your own practice boxes around "areas that [you] wrote in a rush, where the language was plain and featureless" and varied your methods until the language sang.

I'm sure you could make the language of a persuasive essay sing, too, John. But no matter how much you enjoyed writing, say, your position paper on African American Vernacular English in the classroom, I think writing fiction excited and engaged you in a way writing another academic essay could not. And this brings me back to my reason for writing you this letter, to explaining the point I made at its very beginning: I think you came to love literature (and to want to teach it) because you longed to write it. I knew this ever since you wrote, in your literacy autobiography, that you are "constantly imagining things to write." It was clear to me then and is even more clear to me now that your love of literature is—like mine—fueled by your admiration for prose like Woolf's and Morrison's and your desire to craft stories of your own.

In that literacy autobiography, you share examples of how you "make [your] life a story, narrating trivial happenings around [you] in poetry." This is a person who wants to write. And so it broke my heart that you followed each example with "That's not really literary though," a refrain consciously crafted to convey your fraught relationship with writing. That refrain is familiar to anyone (like me) who has thought (hoped!) that they *could* write well but has never truly practiced. "That's not really literary though" is what someone says when they think what they've written is not half bad but they don't know how to make it all good.

My heart was considerably mended when, a couple months after you wrote so disparagingly of your own work, your confidence swelled. That was after you had the school-sanctioned time—and gave yourself permission—to engage in some messy play with language as you re-wrote and re-wrote your short story. Before such an experience, it was surely all too easy to fall prey to the myth of the genius writer, to feel that if the words didn't come easily they'd never come at all. But when you came to feel like a capable tinkerer in your own shop, you just

wanted to get down to work and see what you could imagine into being. It was so fun to watch you with your sleeves up.

When, after all that, you *still* de-emphasized writing in your reasons for going into teaching English, I worried that I had been projecting too many of my feelings onto you. Still, I clung to knowing that self-narratives aren't easily revised, reminded of all the studies that have found that even the most compelling experiences during teacher education often do little to change our stories of who we are and what should be. And why would you think writing should be central when it rarely is? In high schools, reading is king. When students *do* write, it is often to present their reading of a piece of literature; rarely do they write literature of their own. Here is where you may think the parallel I've been making to violin breaks down, for you could argue that artfully playing a Mozart concerto is more akin to *reading* than creating, but reading the repertoire doesn't have to be the all. I think, here, of having heard an interview with singer-songwriter Norah Jones in which she described her childhood piano lessons: each week she had to present practiced scales and the like, but she was also to perform a little something of her own creation. Look what that turned out.

Now imagine what Norah Jones' lessons would have looked like if she were studying writing with a similar teacher. Imagine not only her technical skill years later but all she would have composed! Can you imagine what it would have felt like, as a child, to actually produce ever-improving poems and stories and essays instead of just thinking about writing them? to be taken seriously as a creator rather than given the token creative assignment?

When I was looking for a violin teacher for Rose, I prepared a list of questions for potential teachers, with Norah Jones' piano teacher in mind: Are you open to genres other than classical? How do you encourage your students' creativity? I eventually found a young woman

who had been classically trained but who also plays in a rock band. She challenges Rose (each week, Rose must play from four books—concertos, general etudes, shifting exercises, double-stop exercises), but somehow their work is joyful, and I think it is because Rose’s teacher treats Rose as a fellow-musician, inviting and encouraging her to be expressive in all she does. As a result, Rose will play a shifting exercise—for which she practices moving up and down the fingerboard—in grand style, with broad vibrato and dynamics. And when we are done with our formal practicing, she often keeps playing. Sometimes, she sneaks ahead to a harder concerto to give it a try. Other times, she reviews old favorites or transcribes a violin song for piano (which she has never studied) or writes a new melody.

I realize not all of the students in Rose’s violin studio practice this way. To be sure, Rose has an innate love of her instrument and of classical music—just as, I think, you have an innate love of language and storytelling. I wonder: what kind of environment and what kind of teacher would have led to you having *used* that love, so that you did not end up in my college course saying that you “haven’t written much since [you] were little” and that writing is “an area that [you] are not as confident in [as reading]”? I’ve read enough of the research on writing education to know that just because a teacher is a writer himself doesn’t mean he will be an effective teacher of writing, but my experience with Rose and her teacher has got me thinking that nothing can replace a practicing writer at the head of a writing classroom. Sure, a teacher who doesn’t *practice* writing can guide students toward improvement. But consider this: I have used my knowledge gained from studying violin and piano, as well as my knowledge of learning theory, to guide Rose’s at-home violin practice. However, Rose’s violin teacher notices and suggests things that would never dawn on me. Perhaps more importantly, she knows when to push for polish and when to first unpack things. She knows to at first ignore a clenched left hand (which I

will have repeatedly corrected) when Rose is trying thirds because the muscles will gradually relax as the fingers grow used to playing the challenging double-stops. Meanwhile, I'd assign repetition or expect Rose to keep every eventual goal in sight now.

You would think, given my dual degree in English and Creative Writing, that I would have been as intuitive a teacher of writing as Rose's teacher is of violin, but I left teaching high school feeling as impatient as I sometimes feel after a violin session with Rose. I had been labeled a "good writer," but I didn't write much. And I never had. Turns out it's not just high schools that privilege reading. I earned a Creative Writing degree without being enrolled in any writing classes for two of my four years in college. Did you know any music performance majors? Can you imagine them not taking a performance course *every* semester of their studies? I think back to my visits to the music building at my university, to its labyrinth of practice rooms, to the snippets of scales and trills and cadenzas escaping as doors opened and closed. I had to go there if I wanted to see certain friends, because they might as well have lived there—always practicing, always rehearsing, frequently playing pieces composed by friends. We had no writing rooms in the English building, had to make no mandatory revisions nor publish our work. We sat on lobby couches, drank a lot of coffee, took cigarette breaks on columned porches, talked about books.

I've tried to figure out why a student writer's experience is so different than a student musician's, and I always come back to the old adage that a writer should read five times more than she writes. The spirit of that adage, which I support, seems the impetus for a reading-heavy curriculum, but somewhere along the line, the ratio got skewed in even greater favor of reading. Again, I think schools of music have found the more appropriate balance; their students study music history and theory, but they never sacrifice composition and practice. So why the



difference? The best answer I've been able to come up with is this: Maybe because kids learn how to write in kindergarten and write all the years after, it is assumed that writing doesn't take special practice and attention. It just takes assigning and doing. Write a literary analysis (though we typically read novels not literary analyses). Don't write a novel. Write a poem once in a while. (How about a haiku or acrostic?) Want to major in writing? Write some more poems for homework. Done.

I know I'm over-simplifying here. I had some poetry professors from whom I learned a lot, even if I didn't write all that much for them. Still, it wasn't until leaving high school teaching to pursue a doctorate that I wrote enough to realize what I'd been missing. Since then, I've written dozens of pages I haven't minded throwing away, because I appreciate where those pages got me. I've gone from experiencing the feeling you describe in your literacy history—"with my fingers on the keys...anxiety cripp[ing] me"—to feeling in confident control of what I write. You might remember the piece I shared at our Literacy Histories Publishing Party, the one about me calling my dad for help with a college essay. You might also remember that the call came after many tears and after I'd bitten my hand repeatedly. I know, the hand thing is really strange. I risked revealing this self-destructive and odd habit of my adolescence because I think it captures how frustrating writing can be for even those deemed talented at it. I bring it up again because only now do I realize my anger at my hand for failing to effortlessly translate my thoughts. I had dreamed of a clear pathway from head to hand but didn't yet know that it takes time for that conduit to open up. It takes practice. It takes sitting down often and for considerable amounts of time.

I went into teaching writing as a supposedly very skilled writer. I'd won university writing awards and had published a bit. I'd been accepted into a prestigious MFA program but

turned it down when I saw the price tag, opting instead for an MEd to skip right to the inevitable teaching. For all that supposed skill, though, I would teach writing so differently now after having written so much more myself. Mostly, I would make time and more time for practice. I would have students read widely in the genres in which they were to write, and I would make sure those genres existed outside of high school classrooms. I would resist the push to polish, instead giving students many low-risk opportunities to play with their prose. I would do what you and I did after you took my course: co-design an exciting writing project, write often, and meet often to talk about that writing.

When you approached me to supervise your Honors project, I hoped that extending your work on the short story you'd written for my course would strengthen your confidence in—and enthusiasm for—writing and teaching writing. You say that's been the case. Even so, let's keep writing. Even so, I worry it may be hard to keep that spirit alive when you get to a classroom of your own, when you have to compromise with senior colleagues and top-down mandates, when you get caught up in the day-to-day. I write this letter in hopes of getting a song stuck in your head, one to hear in those hard times. It is a simple, beautiful melody written by a young Norah or Rose after a teacher invited her to write it. I write to encourage you to make your classroom like the humming music studios at my university. I write to remind you that in your classroom will be a girl with a ponytail who, when given the chance for her love of music or writing to take root, can command a stage with a confident performance. Imagine her now, nodding to the conductor with a sharp intake of breath, ready to begin.

All best,

Kate

### III.

“[The author’s] words have become my images and sounds, part of me. You don’t do that with theories. You don’t do that with a system of ideas. You do it with a story, because in a story—oh, like it says in the Bible, *the word becomes flesh*.”

—anonymous student, quoted by Robert Coles in *The Call of Stories:  
Teaching and the Moral Imagination*

And the Self as protagonist is always, as it were, pointing to the future.

—Jerome S. Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*

An electronic sign tells me my train is eight minutes late, so I take my time descending the ramp and then make sport of walking the line where gray cement meets the rumble strip of blue that warns passengers away from the platform’s edge. How many times have I stepped between Rose and that blue, reminding her to keep a safe distance from the electric chasm below?

I settle into a lean against the inside of the heated shelter and try to ignore the smell of urine as I turn to watch the regular morning commuters emerge from the ramp’s mouth. Some wear sensible sneakers below suits. Others wear heels that I decide can’t be comfortable. More middle-aged men than I would have imagined tote backpacks. Almost all of the commuters turn their heads every few steps to see if the train is yet in view.

One woman keeps continual watch for the train, standing well into the field of blue, almost at the platform’s drop. She carries a briefcase and wears a blazer, clearly ready for work, but there is something in the way she leans, like a sad wish, that makes me want to watch for *her*.

When I make note of the woman's tight bun, I realize she has reminded me of Daisy, the protagonist in my student John's dystopian story—Daisy, who left high school English teaching to be a secretary at the Department of Media Distribution rather than have to follow the scripted curriculum of the newly-elected, hyper-nationalist Allegiance government.

I know the woman in front of me is not Daisy. Still, I can't help wondering if she too has learned to pass as a cog in some bureaucratic machine but is secretly thinking "how easy it would be to fall forward [in front of the oncoming train]. How easy it would be to annihilate herself, to explode into a cloud of dust and stars, or more accurately flesh and bone." When I hear the rumble of train then see headlights speeding toward us, I hold my breath as the woman almost imperceptibly leans in, exhaling only when she stumbles back just in time for the train's gusty stop. I recall Daisy stepping away from the "phosphorous yellow line warning passengers not to step further" and remember how John had explained that Daisy was not afraid to jump; her life had become too "automatized" for her to do so:

It was not fear that held her back, but rather a sudden realization of the pointlessness of it all. No, Daisy gave up. Easier to perform a lobotomy on her mind, to clear it of the fire, the gold, the joy. ... The only ones she saw who were managing (under the Allegiance government) were the ones who discarded their lives and identities. She too must let the past wither and fall away like petals from a garden flower as winter approaches.

As we fall in line to board the train, the woman's flat stare turns bright as she recognizes another passenger, and I brighten with the sudden recollection that in John's recent revision of his story, he has returned Daisy to the classroom. She has not had to completely "discard [her]...identit[y]" after all.

I find a window seat and, in the window's reflection, continue to watch the woman who is now seated across the aisle and chatting amiably with her seat mate. Once, I catch another reflection instead and, when I do, I slowly realize it is me. *I* am the one who left high school English teaching for good.

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"You look so hip!"

I regret the words as soon as they've left my mouth. They imply that I've never seen John look stylish before.

"I mean, you're normally dressed so formally." And it's true. Most often, John wears a button down shirt with either a vest or cardigan over it. I try to remember if I've *ever* seen him in a t-shirt, much less a necklace.

"The students were surprised, too. But all the other teachers dress down on Friday, so I thought I'd try it."

I smile encouragingly, trying to make up for my inadvertent rudeness, and gesture for John to sit down across from me.

"Oh, I almost forgot!" I tell him, "I was thinking about Daisy while I was waiting for the train—"

John smiles, and I can tell he is flattered that I think about his writing outside of school-sanctioned moments like these.

"—about how in the first draft, there was the whole Anna Karenina bit. I mean, there's an Anna Karenina moment in this second draft, too, but she stays an automaton in that first draft—"

"Exactly."

“—and in this one she *doesn't*.”

“Right.” John finishes getting a pen and notebook from his bag, then settles into the conversation, gives me full eye contact.

I continue. “That’s so fascinating. I’m so fascinated by *you* as a future teacher making a choice *now* to resist, whereas before it was kind of—it was dystopian, true—but it was kind of must-go-with-the-flow. I don’t know if you have any thoughts on that, but as I was reading the new draft, I was like, This is *not* how it ended originally. [Daisy’s] changing. She’s making a choice.”

“Yeah. She *is*.” John sits up even straighter in his seat, puts down his pen. “You know, this mirrors my own view of teaching as activism and teaching for social justice.”

John pauses, and I make myself say nothing, hoping he will say more. Thankfully, he goes on.

“That’s always been a huge part of my teaching philosophy, and I think that we see Daisy doing this...” He starts again. “You know, we’re seeing her...”

I see John glance down at the table, to where my phone is recording our conversation.

He tries one more time, “Um... I feel like I’m trying to be...” He straightens his body even more, takes on a professorial air.

“I know,” I say, apologetically. “I noticed that and I was just about to say, You’re changing, James—right in front of my eyes.” We smile at each other. “Forget that,” I say, motioning to the recorder.

John laughs, letting his body relax in the process.

“Don’t worry,” I reassure him. “I don’t need your ‘official’ philosophy. I’m just saying it’s kind of interesting to see that before she was a drone and now she’s not.”

“Yeah, well, I think that school is a really interesting place as a form of social control. In one of my courses, I was just introduced to the Foucault idea of the panopticon. And I haven’t been doing much deep reading on it, just sort of Google-searching it, but I’m like, Yeah, that’s totally true!”

He leans forward in his seat, and I am relieved that John is John again, talking more quickly, energized by an idea.

“And I actually think I’m going to try to incorporate that architecture into the architecture of her school—”

“Neat,” I say, and I mean it.

“Yeah. I...” John leans back in his chair again. “I think that it can be hard to teach for social justice, especially when you get curriculum and you get, like, Eagle Standards.”

We both laugh heartily now. In his new draft, John has had the Allegiance Government institute a maze of learning objectives geared toward American supremacy.

“That was an awesome choice: ‘Eagle.’” I laugh again but am also thinking about how it’s not very funny at all. For my doctoral exams, I’d read about America’s post-Sputnik anxiety over its international competitiveness and what Janet Alsup called the resultant “cyclical rhetoric of failure and reform” in education. It’s not too hard to imagine the Eagle Standards as part of that cycle.

I look to my notes, skim. “There was something I wanted to ask you about... Oh, I know what it was! So Daisy, for all her resistance, is still a bit *prim*.”

John takes up laughing again.

“And I’ve been thinking about this a lot,” I tell him. “She can’t help herself, like when she has to correct Caroline that *The Awakening* is a novella, not a story.”

John is really laughing now, his face flushing. He doesn't seem like he'll be able to stop laughing anytime soon, so I continue. "And I wanted to know [about] this trait. Is it an English teacher stereotype, or is it, 'Oh, that's just what Daisy's like'? Do you know what I mean?"

"To be honest," John laugh-talks, "I feel like that's so much self-insertion."

"Yeah? And what does that say about you then?" We're both laughing again now.

"Right?!" John says, self-deprecatingly.

"For all her progressiveness, she *is* the uptight librarian lady." I smile.

John catches his breath. "Okay, but look at the way that I usually dress."

"What about it?"

"The kids told me that I dress like a nerd a few weeks ago." John chuckles, but I can tell his pride is a little injured.

"So, do you think it's unavoidable that English teachers are going to wear button-ups and—"

"I think that it's at least me."

"You're coming through in Daisy's love of music and art, too, right?"

John chuckles. "Yeah, I referenced a Diane Arbus photograph and have Daisy sit on a Henry Moore style chair."

"Right. So she obviously has a deeply passionate side about art and culture—"

"And activism," John adds.

"Yeah, but it's tempered by this grating person. Admittedly, she uses green pen [instead of red], but I was surprised she used green pen because of how you've painted her. I mean, how can you not see her in the schoolmarm of old movies and old books."

"Yeah, absolutely."



“I’m pushing you on that a little bit,” I say, trying to soften my voice, “because she kind of embodies a lot of the strictness and formality of a system that you *say* you’re pushing up against.”

“Right?!”

“Right. So, I guess one thing to think about is, Is she like that [only] *now*? But she seems like she always was.”

“Riiight.” John’s forehead wrinkles as he thinks it all through.

“You know what I mean?” I ask. “Because even going to that music festival [in the flashback, before The Allegiance assumed power], Daisy’s worrying about her outfit being too *un-teacherly*. She’s always been warring with it. I mean, I understand that as soon as you have to be in [schools] as something different [than a student], you put on—that’s actually what my research *started* around, that I feel like the *shoulds* of teaching change so much the elemental experience of what it is to be a human with other humans.”

John’s face relaxes. “Yeah! And you know I’ve talked about that a little bit with this story and how it’s sort of reflecting how *I’ve* felt, [especially being] 21 years old when [the students are] 18 years old.”

“Right.” I remember how John had written that Daisy, “working with students only a few years younger than her” felt she had “to put a distance between herself and them with their carefree tendencies: the brash way they spoke and the casual way they leaned back in their chairs precariously enough to make her anxious while they wore goofy grins.”

John pulls me back to the present. “It’s like, if I wasn’t going to be a teacher,” he says, tilting his chin up and looking at the ceiling, “I wonder how I would be.” He returns his eyes to me. “You know what I mean?”

“Yeah.”

“I feel like that’s seeped into my entire life, not just me in [the classroom].”

It has certainly seeped into his story, I think. Daisy is not exactly like him—John’s becoming too imaginative and skilled a writer for that—but when Daisy looks in the mirror before heading out to the music festival, worrying at her “flashy garb” because “teachers don’t dress like this,” I can tell John is looking in the mirror, too. My blood rushes as I realize I’m seeing in action what I’ve been reading about for months: narrative as a form of inquiry into the teaching life and self. Thank you Alsup and Clandinin and Connelly and Jalongo and Isenberg and Schaafsma and Vinz. And how cool that this is fun-to-write *fictional* narrative and still useful inquiry?

I check my phone to make sure it’s still recording and note the time. “Ooo, we better get down to work. Shall we look at that music festival passage? I’ve got some questions and notes for you.”

“Yes, let’s.” John picks his pen back up and we begin a scintillating discussion—really—about syntax.

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This is the life: spending the morning in a cafe reading the latest draft of John’s growing novella. Honey nutmeg latte. Easy chair. I stop to drink the sun pouring through the cafe window, close my eyes against the bright and think of Jane Kenyon’s poem “In the Grove: The Poet at Ten.” How did it end? Something about a surge of sunlight that brought “joy so violent it was hard to distinguish from pain?” I think: I am out in the world in the sunny middle of a weekday. I think:

Soon, I will have to turn to grading the stack of portfolios in my tote bag, but I am grading them out in the world in the sunny middle of a weekday.

When I was teaching high school, I often went to a chain cafe after dinner and on weekends, sat in a straight-backed chair at a small square table, put in ear plugs, plowed through papers. I had to get out of the house to be productive, and the libraries closed too early for me to make a significant dent in the 130-student stack. I didn't realize how regular this routine was until my sister, who lives in a neighboring town, told me one of her friends felt bad that I needed a second job in addition to teaching. More than once, I'd run into her friend "on my way to work at Starbucks." I chuckle at the recollection and turn back to John's novella.

Soon, I am laughing in earnest and out loud as I read a conversation between John's protagonist, Daisy, and the Director of Curriculum who has dragged her on a date:

"How did you get to be Director of Curriculum? That's quite an accomplishment for such a young man."

...

He chuckles in a faux humble way, as if he would be flattered if he didn't find these accomplishments just as impressive as she said they were.

"I was involved with the Allegiance early on. They value loyalty, and when I expressed interest in education I was given opportunities to move up the ranks."

"So you never taught?" Daisy asks with sincere curiosity.

He shakes his head in the negative.

"It must be challenging to decide curriculum and to manage teachers without any experience in the classroom."

“No, not really.”

Daisy bites her tongue, her fingernail piercing a layer of skin. She smiles.

Such humor and wisdom from a supposed novice! Already, John is learning the too-often ways of the education world. Will naming them here, I wonder, empower or discourage him?

It’s time for a refill. As I make my way to the coffee counter I wonder, not for the first time, if all this thinking about the state of schools is ultimately empowering or discouraging me.

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John’s hit the nail on the head again, I think as I turn from a new draft of his novella to the student teacher and projection screen in front of me. Trying to give the student teacher, Caleb, space to ready himself and his materials, I’ve just been reading a dialogue between Daisy and her colleague, Ruth, in which Ruth clears up curricular confusion: “You’re thinking of the Communication Demands, not the Patriotic Standards,” she tells Daisy. “I meant I’m working with my students on Patriotic Standard 2-C. Have you been working on Communication Demand 2-C?” Now before me, on a PowerPoint slide, is a list of standards with names like RL.9-10.1 and RL.9-10.4.

As the students begin to file in, Caleb stops by my desk to drop off a revised lesson plan, quickly explaining that last night he’d been sent test data and tasked with re-teaching certain skills before a re-test later in the week. He then rushes to the door where he finally takes a breath before turning on a big smile to welcome each student by name.

When the bell rings, Caleb dims the lights and heads to the front of the room. He explains to students that they’ll get to return to the short story they’ve been reading later in the period, after they practice for success on the upcoming re-test. He directs students’ attention to the

projected slide, to its list of skills they have not yet mastered. He then goes to the teacher's desk and presses a keyboard arrow to change slides, revealing the first multiple-choice practice question.

In the cold quiet of the classroom, I remind myself of Caleb's warm welcome to students just minutes ago and of the other time I saw him teach, when his classroom was less like the one in which Daisy and Ruth discussed the Eagle Standards and more like Daisy's classroom in the Time Before (before The Allegiance came to power), where she and her student Caroline talked excitedly about *The Awakening* over lunch.

Caleb is making an effort to circulate but never gets too far before he must return to the computer to advance slides, like a pencil tethered to the center point of a circle, able to make only its prescribed and limited sweep of arc. When he looks for my face in the dark, I do my best to catch his eye and smile.

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I must have been reading John's novella for an hour by the time I stop to think of Clarissa Dalloway. I turn to check the bedside clock. Yes, over an hour. Have I ever gotten so lost in a student's writing? How many of my English education students have ever gotten this good?

Daisy is nothing like Clarissa and she is certainly not planning for a grand party. Still, knowing how much John and I both love *Mrs. Dalloway*, I can't help but think of Clarissa as Daisy enters a florist's shop:

[Daisy] thinks of the crisp white walls of her apartment, stinging and dehydrating as salt. It needs color. It needs life. "I need a plant," she [says] to herself. The bell

rings when she opens the door, but nobody rushes to greet her. She makes her way past the flowers ready to be cut and shoved into bags for bouquets, past the nettles, daisies, and long purples. She eyes an arrangement of prickly cactuses she wonders if she could become friends with. She certainly feels like they would understand her mood. But she can be careless, she thinks. It could lead to trouble, and she does not want that. A succulent plant catches her eye, its leaves extended out like a six-pointed star.

Here are not Clarissa's "delphiniums, sweet peas, bunches of lilacs; and carnations, masses of carnations." Here are cactuses, nettles, and sharp-pointed succulents—small steps toward life for a Daisy awakening from Allegiance control. I try to decide whether this plant symbolism is too obvious, whether I should tell John to reconsider it. Instead, I keep going back to those "white walls...stinging and dehydrating as salt." I love those "stinging and dehydrating" walls. And it's not as if this is the last draft. Better, for now, to let John play with symbolism (just as he's started to play with sequence and time-shifts and genre, reorganizing sections and inserting flashbacks and police reports).

As I tuck the draft under my bed and switch off the lamp, I think about how I don't resent staying up late for work like this. And I think about how I started my day: reading Arthur Applebee's (2017) report on a national study of writing in public secondary schools in which Applebee documented the great extent to which curriculum and instruction is driven by high stakes exams and how little writing is required to do well on these exams. He'd concluded that students could "do well in all subjects by learning to do well on multiple choice items" (p. 20). No wonder all those other teacher educator-researchers whose work I've been reading—Bentley and Fleischer and Andrew-Vaughan and Stockinger—found many pre-service English teachers

to be afraid of writing. And yet here is John, growing less and less afraid of the subject he'd once called "the scary thing." Here is John painting scenes that play in my mind as I drift off to sleep.

Buried in Applebee's essay was a statistic that comes to me now, almost disrupting the ripple of coming sleep: only 3% of students' writing is story writing (p. 21). What a missed opportunity, I think, as I let myself slip further into images of Daisy's world— the ring of the shop door, those nettles and long purples. What a lovely way to build content knowledge and confidence. All that beauty missed.

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It's a rude awakening. As she walks into the classroom for our weekly seminar, one of John's fellow student teachers, Peyton, is describing the unit she has been designing for the Teacher Performance Assessment. She looks both tired and excited, happy to have finally worked out a plan. I hesitate to poke a needle into her bubble of enthusiasm, but better now than later.

"You might need to reconsider your focus," I tell her. She has been describing a writing unit, but the Assessment's fifteen rubrics concentrate on reading.

She sighs deeply, puts her hand to her head. I can tell she's mad at herself. She's read the assessment handbook before; she knows those rubrics. I and John and her other classmates commiserate: It's hard to keep fifty pages of guidelines straight, we tell her. You can't be mad at yourself for planning a great unit that your students will probably love.

I suggest that, before we get started, everyone refresh after a long day of teaching. Hit the cafe, hit the bathroom. "I'll review the handbook while you're gone, just to be sure."

No wonder she's confused, I think, as I begin to turn through the handbook and almost immediately see that teacher candidates must have students "create a written product." As I read further, however, it becomes clear that this product might be only a sentence or a short paragraph and is used solely to evaluate students' developing abilities to "construct meaning from, interpret, or respond to a complex text." Reading is always king. I close the handbook in frustration and wait for my students to come back.

As I peel an orange, fuel to get me through this late class, I think: I will tell them to play it safe. I will tell them to play it safe because their licensure is at stake. John walks back in, trying to cheer Peyton, and I resist interrupting to ask him, "Am I any better than the Allegiance?" Here I am, about to encourage them to do as they're told, no matter what they think their students need.

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On the way out of seminar, John hands me the latest draft of Daisy's tale, and I am relieved that I'll have a distraction for the train ride home.

Having found a seat on the first car of the crowded train (Could my day be turning around?), I scan the pages, looking for new additions, but when I come across a favorite scene which has been moved to later in the novella, I stop. This scene—the beginning of Daisy's rebellion—always gives me hope.

"Why are the desks like that?" a young woman asks.

As the students enter the classroom, they are uncertain what to do. The tidy rows are gone. Instead, the desks have been dragged into a large circle. Daisy sits at one of the desks and smiles at the students. "Good question, Margaret. I



thought we should change things up a little. I've been doing too much talking, so I thought this would help us hear more voices."

Margaret is visibly surprised, either because of the content of what was said or the use of her name Daisy could not tell, but it makes her smile.

"We've looked a bit at early American literature, so I thought we should go a bit more modern. Here, take one and pass them on," Daisy says, handing a pile of pamphlets to the young man courageous enough to sit next to her.

"This isn't literature, this is just a pamphlet for the Allegiance."

"That's right, George, it is. So let's talk about what literature is. What do you think of when you think of literature?"

I skim the next page or so, where I know Daisy's students hash out the meaning of "literature." I find the part I'm looking for.

"So then the purpose of literature is to communicate a message?"

Students nod in agreement. Daisy nods too. This is good.

"Alright, then let's return to the pamphlet. It has a message, right? So can I get a volunteer to read the first paragraph?"

A blonde-haired girl raises her hand. "Go ahead, Jane."

"A Reminder from the Allegiance Party: America is still in danger. There are enemies abroad and within this nation that would seek to have our way of life..."

"Deteriorated," Daisy offers.

"Deteriorated. Our values and our freedom are in jeopardy. But there is something you can do."

“Let me interrupt you there. Thanks, Jane. The pamphlet mentions freedom. What do you associate with the word freedom?”

At the mention of freedom, I let the pages fall into my lap. The scene isn't having the desired effect. Usually, I joy in seeing Daisy break free from the mold of mechanical Allegiance worker. No more delivering scripted lectures. No more avoiding students' gazes. But, for the first time, I realize that Daisy's revolution isn't very revolutionary. After all, we've been having our students sit in circles and critique texts for years now.

As I try to see through my reflection in the train's window to the red taillights of cars stuck in the evening commute, I think about Daisy's question—"What do you associate with the word freedom?"—and remember a conversation with a former colleague during which we realized that we had unknowingly mastered the illusion of freedom in our classrooms. When we offered some element of choice on essay prompts, for example, the choices were really always our own (or the College Board's). And now I remember a conference paper I've just heard: Todd DeStigter (2013) suggesting that reformers' claims that argument is *the* ticket to academic success and active citizenship only serves to keep people under the illusion of potential participation and power. Believing history has shown that rational argumentation is often no match for ideology and power, DeStigter warned that depictions of argument as *the* way to be heard in the world "delegitimiz[e] more agonistic or even revolutionary models of public activism, models that at times must be followed to build institutions and foster modes of daily human association that are worthy of being called 'democratic.'" In the red taillights outside the train window, I see instead glowing torches raised in protest. There are so many of them, the sky looks as if it is burning. Bleeding.

I turn back to Daisy and am glad to find her safe on the page, encircled by her students. Part of me wants to walk into that classroom and tell her to play it safe, turn back to those Eagle Standards, at least for now. Another part of me wants to stand back and watch it all play out, in the pages of John's story, from a safe distance.

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When John and I write together like this, sitting at the same table and both quiet for a time, I think of Yagelski's "A Thousand Writers Writing: Seeking Change through the Radical Practice of Writing as a Way of Being" (2009). Describing a National Writing Project event, Yagelski writes, "Imagine 1,000 people gathered in the same place, all writing at the same time. When they are finished, they put aside the product of their writing, though not the effects of the experience" (2009, p. 6). There are only two of us here, writing about recent teaching moments, but the experience is still powerful. It is as Yagelski describes in another essay: we are "writing as a way to experience ourselves in the world" and, in the process, we are "bring[ing] our being more sharply into focus" (2012, p. 191, 192). From this "awareness of self emerges not a sense of our separateness" but "a multifaceted sense of self that is connected, through language, to other selves and the world we share" (p. 192, 193). Our writing becomes "a vehicle for sustained inquiry into our experiences, a means of understanding who we are," and a means of human connection (p. 193).

This time, our shared writing experience is just a little different than usual. John has recently graduated so I have invited him to my home for our meeting. We can share a meal. He can finally meet my husband who will stop home on his lunch break. We can talk for as long as

we want. And, after we finish writing, talk and talk we do, over three pots of oolong tea and a full bowl of honey sesame cashews, until it's almost time for me to pick up Rose from school.

Perhaps it is time's rush toward 3:00—or the knowledge that John and I will meet less often now that he's graduated—that gives me the courage to ask something I have been wanting to ask for a while now.

“So you once said that [writing together, especially working on Daisy's story] has helped you a lot, just in terms of you thinking about who you want to be as a teacher and your teacher identity. How?”

John smiles his “That's a meaty question—I'll need to think about that” smile.

To give him more to go on, I add: “I'm thinking about how your life with Daisy has affected you. You guys have been together for a while.”

We both laugh, and I'm pretty sure we're both thinking about how when the two of us sit down to talk, we're never really alone. Daisy is always somewhere in the vicinity. I imagine her now, in the next room on my grey couch, marking essays with her green pen.

I go on. “There's a lot I could have said about you when I first met you that still holds true about your teaching philosophy, but what has been clarified or changed for you?”

John swallows, readying himself to put his development into words. “So I think that the biggest thing has been the ways in which for me education and activism are related to one another, um, because for Daisy that's a very literal thing, and I think for me, I try to make it a pretty literal thing. That's why I think that sociology is so important—teaching for social justice. I'm teaching for equality. And I think that in other situations it's been very easy for me to just say I'm teaching for social justice, because look at the way we're reading this bell hooks essay. Look at the way we're reading this feminist text or whatever. And it's kind of gone unquestioned—like,

Yeah, that's what social justice pedagogy is. Especially when I throw in some good buzz words like 'empowering students' or whatever. So it's been really good to have that pushback and be like, Okay, *are* you empowering students? *How* are you empowering students? And I think it's also been really cool to have this [novella] that's followed me through my increasing absorption into the world of teaching, where it was this thing that started out in my first methods class and then when I came back to it I was in a more intensive field experience situation, and then I was in student teaching. I was able to find ways to put my experiences into this writing—ways that went beyond just making it a good story, because there is the desire that I have to make this a well-crafted story that builds on itself *and* is impactful.”

I know I need to get going soon, but I can't keep myself from digging deeper. “That's why it amazes me that you don't want to go find a school where you can do [more progressive teaching]. Sorry, I'm [not being fair], because I didn't go find a place to do that.”

John laughs in appreciation of me calling myself out.

“It's just that you're such a Dev,” I say, thinking of Daisy's disappeared boyfriend in his “Third World Solidarity” t-shirt, “but—”

“But also a little bit like a Daisy, too, right?” John finishes my thought, laughing.

I join his laughter. “Right, right, right. I think this story is ultimately like your Cybil story. You know Cybil, the multiple personalities?”

“Right?! But I don't feel like I'm doing a *bad* job.”

“Oh, I don't think you are!” I feel myself trying to backtrack. I've gotten too comfortable, gone too far. I know that John is always doing his best, that I am always doing my best. “And I don't think I did either.”

“Like I don't *feel* like I'm doing a disservice to students.” Then John sits up a little straighter, tilts his head and scrunches his mouth like he's ready to make a concession. “But I think that it is also kind of like, What's everybody else doing? Like comparatively I'm doing great, but that doesn't mean that—”

“And I don't mean to ever imply that you're not doing fabulously for your environment, because I think you are.” I'm still trying to fix things, make sure I haven't offended. And John is truly a dynamic teacher. “I've told you that enough, right? Do you know that enough?” I'm looking at John more directly than I ever have, trying to make sure he hears me. Really hears me.

“Yeah,” he says, and I'm pretty sure I believe him. Still, he can sense my unease and so tries to reassure me. “I always appreciate these conversations,” he says.

I sigh, relieved, and reach over for John's tea cup, then the empty bowl. I appreciate these conversations, too.

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Now we are sharing a meal at the apartment John shares with his teacher sister. Unsure of what he likes, I've brought a variety of sandwiches, and we end up sharing them all: hummus, veggies, grilled chicken. Between bites, John fills me in on his first semester in his very own classroom.

“Yeah, so, I have started a creative writing club. So, that's pretty cool. We have published our first little booklet. I can give you a copy later, if you want.”

John breaks for a potato chip, and I break into a smile.

Chip done, John carries on. “So that's been really fun. Um. I don't yet quite know exactly how to do a creative writing club, but I've been doing my best to provide prompts every week

and to give opportunities for sharing work and offering feedback and revision and all of that good stuff. And, yeah, I know that my goal is for us in the spring to publish an actual, proper literary arts magazine since the school doesn't have one.” John puts down his sandwich as he describes the drawbacks and benefits of working in a small, charter school; there aren’t a lot of resources, but there is a good deal of freedom.

Even though John’s generally not a fan of charter schools, he has told me he passed up other job offers, eager for the relative freedom his school affords and heartened by the administration’s commitment to social justice. He has even moved to live closer to the school and, as I listen to him talk about his new professional home in the inner city, I can’t help but remember John when I first met him, when he was determined to work and live in the suburbs. Surely, he hadn’t imagined this future: the frequent whine of sirens, the lake view made possible by an unfashionable zip code. But what a nice view it is, and what a cozy home. I finish my lunch and lean back, full and comfortable.

We talk for another hour and a half—about ways to integrate art and writing in a student magazine, about an online publishing source a bunch of his students use outside of school, about writing *with* our students (John has a piece in the creative writing club’s booklet). And then John is describing a feeling that I remember so well from my first years of teaching.

“I mean, I care about content. I care about students getting the knowledge that they need to get, but I feel like kind of the most important thing is enthusiasm and student engagement. And I will definitely say that I see a lot more student engagement when it comes to these more creative or personal prompts—even just as bell ringers, like when I ask them to journal about a kind of personal topic that ties into what the work of fiction is dealing with. And during the first third, half of class when they are writing or working on the bell-ringer, there is so much more

enthusiasm. You know, [when I ask] who wants to share, *everybody* wants to share, but then when [I ask about the book]—So, does anybody have any thoughts about why Waverly did x, y, z,?—then it goes back to the handful of students who always are eager and willing to participate. I think we need to discuss Waverly and what her motivations are, but it's nice to have those moments that like...”

John’s voice trails off and we are both silent for a moment.

“You can tell I'm thinking deeply,” I say.

“Yeah.” John laughs.

“Well, one thing I was going to suggest to you, what could open it up for you, would be thinking of writing as a way of reading, not just as a way of relating or thinking. There was one sheet in that packet I gave you [in the writing methods course] that described different ways of engaging with literary texts through writing. Sometimes it's personal writing, and sometimes it's not, but it's ways of tapping in, making it more of a conversation between you and the author. So it can be something like the Image Explosion: Take an image from the text and have it be the beginning of a narrative about yourself. Now let's look at [all of our] narratives, look for the threads through them, and here we are getting to the heart of this difficult *Dalloway* passage.” I sigh. “I know exactly that feeling, when it feels like you’re throwing them some personal or creative writing as a bone to get them to do the real work [as if personal or creative writing can’t be intellectual work]. And I feel like that's an exhausting way to teach sometimes. It’s like throwing them a bone, and they're sticking along for *you*. I do think there are ways of making the analytical work as engaging, because what you're doing then is you're saying reading is not objective and we know that. It's the reader engaging in conversation with the author. The question is: How can we make [explicit] that interaction so that the intellectual work here isn't



disinviting students? Because I think that's what happens—like, Here, you can write about how you feel for these ten minutes but now you need to do this work.”

“*Yeah*,” John nods slowly.

I tell John about my most successful attempts to continually engage students during close reading. “With my A.P. students, I’d ask them to do close analysis in service of a bigger question. What does it mean to be human? What is evil? Their reading was part of deeper, personal inquiry.” The units weren’t perfect, I tell him. And they usually bookended much more traditional ones, so our time together still felt divided. “So I guess that would be my challenge to you,” I tell John. “See if you can find ways to not have it feel so divided.”

“Yeah, I get what you're saying.”

We both take breaths and tidy the plates in front of us. In the comfortable silence, I think about all those researchers—Kamler and Ritchie and Wilson and Whitney—who insist that teacher identity work is most effective when done with others, and I think I finally *get* them. I look through the dining room window to the lake and notice that the water is grayer; the sun has climbed over John’s building, leaving us in shadow. It’s time to ask the question I often end on.

“So since we last spoke have you read or seen or heard anything that has changed who you'd like to be or what you'd like to accomplish as a teacher?” Then I add: “Or has the actuality of just having your own classroom changed anything?”

“Hmm.”

This is a big question after such a long talk. What a game partner I’ve got here, I think as I see John’s thoughts crinkling his brow.

John opens his mouth as if to speak but remains silent. After a moment, he tries again.

“I think that I have realized that instruction is not where I shine. Ironically enough. I think I'm a very thoughtful teacher. I plan a lot, I'm very thoughtful when it comes to things like grouping or readings, and I care about the school environment, but admittedly when it comes to actually being in front of the class I think that I do a good job but I don't think that it's where I'm best. So, I think that I'm somebody who falls into routines a little bit where it's very easy to say, Okay, bell ringer, discussion, read out loud, homework, and then start over the next day. And so that's something that I'm definitely trying to get better at—coming up with the wider variety of activities, coming up with more ways to bring all of the students in.”

I remind him of where our discussion started—the creative writing club that has gotten a number of his students more engaged—and he brightens.

“Yeah, let me get you that booklet.”

John leaves the room to get a copy of his club's first publication, and I stand, stretch, and start bringing dishes to the kitchen. I pause in front of the refrigerator, always interested to see other people's magnets. Andy Warhol. Cool. I linger to look at the pastel Mao and the painted Marilyn, and as I do I am hit with a sudden realization: this is the first time John and I haven't talked about the Allegiance or Daisy. He had warned me that the novella was on hiatus, that he hoped to get back to it over breaks and summer vacation. Still, it seems so strange to leave Daisy behind.

“Here it is!”

I return to the dining room where John is again sitting at the table, the booklet now in front of him. He slides it across the smooth wood and, by the time it reaches me, I am Daisy and John is Caroline, Daisy's former student. I am back in the novella:

“Ms. Heron?” a smoky voice calls.

Daisy looks up, eyeing a young woman with a short asymmetrical black bob and strong arms covered in tattoos on the opposite side of the bar. She recognizes her as if from a different life.

“Caroline?”

“I can’t believe it! How have you been?” Caroline grins, resting her elbows on the bar and leaning forward.

Daisy smiles gingerly, straightening her back while mumbling that she can’t complain.

...

“Do you ever find the time to write?”

Caroline smirks, “I do, actually.”

She glances around the bar again, her eyes narrowed now. From the large pocket of her smock she pulls out a pamphlet, sliding it across the dark wood bar to Daisy.

*Anarchy Now: Poems and Essays on Revolution*

“It’s a zine I publish with a few friends,” Caroline whispers, her eyes dancing in the low light.

Daisy is white. She flips through the pages. Blood on the streets... Kill or be killed... Die with dignity... Be a man.... Allegiance to no government... Power to the people... all interspersed with photographs of the homeless and drawings of firings squads. Daisy slides it back to Caroline.

“I know it’s not much, but it’s fun. Some of the others aren’t the best writers, but I think my pieces are pretty good...” Suddenly Caroline is a high

school student again, showing Daisy the story she had scribbled in her notebook.

“Caroline, this is contraband material. It’s very dangerous of you to have this.”

I take the booklet John has just slid across to me, and my pulse quickens as I feel it between my fingers. I feel the power of my influence in John’s life. I feel the power of his influence in mine. I feel vulnerable, on the edge of something important.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **IRB APPROVAL DOCUMENTS**

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS  
AT CHICAGO

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS)  
Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research (MC 672)  
203 Administrative Office Building  
1737 West Polk Street  
Chicago, Illinois 60612-7227

**Approval Notice**  
**Initial Review (Response To Modifications)**

October 22, 2014

Katharine Sjostrom, M.Ed.  
English M/C 162  
601 S Morgan St  
Chicago, IL 60612  
Phone: (708) 253-2493 / Fax: (312) 413-1005

RE: **Protocol # 2014-0613**  
**"Pre-Service Teacher Identity Development"**

Dear Ms. Sjostrom:

Your Initial Review application (Response To Modifications) was reviewed and approved by the Expedited review process on October 20, 2014. You may now begin your research.

Please note the following information about your approved research protocol:

**Protocol Approval Period:** October 20, 2014 - October 20, 2015  
**Approved Subject Enrollment #:** 52  
**Additional Determinations for Research Involving Minors:** These determinations have not been made for this study since it has not been approved for enrollment of minors.  
**Performance Site:** UIC  
**Sponsor:** None  
**Research Protocol:**

a) Pre-Service Teacher Identity Development; Version 1; 05/21/2014

**Recruitment Material:**

a) Recruitment Script; Version 2; 09/10/2014

**Informed Consents:**

a) Consent Form; Version 3; 10/14/2014

b) A waiver of parental permission and child assent has been granted for recruitment purposes only under 45 CFR 46.116(d) (minimal risk; identification of potential subjects from school records)

Your research meets the criteria for expedited review as defined in 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1) under the following specific categories:

(5) Research involving materials (data, documents, records, or specimens) that have been collected, or will be collected solely for non-research purposes (such as medical treatment or diagnosis),

Phone: 312-996-1711

<http://www.uic.edu/depts/ovcr/oprs/>

FAX: 312-413-2929

- (6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.,  
 (7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including but not limited to research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

**Please note the Review History of this submission:**

Receipt Date	Submission Type	Review Process	Review Date	Review Action
06/23/2014	Initial Review	Expedited	06/26/2014	Modifications Required
10/01/2014	Response To Modifications	Expedited	10/02/2014	Modifications Required
10/15/2014	Response To Modifications	Expedited	10/20/2014	Approved

Please remember to:

→ Use your **research protocol number** (2014-0613) on any documents or correspondence with the IRB concerning your research protocol.

→ Review and comply with all requirements on the enclosure:

**"UIC Investigator Responsibilities, Protection of Human Research Subjects"**

(<http://tiger.uic.edu/depts/ovcr/research/protocolreview/irb/policies/0924.pdf>)

Please note that the UIC IRB has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.

Please be aware that if the scope of work in the grant/project changes, the protocol must be amended and approved by the UIC IRB before the initiation of the change.

We wish you the best as you conduct your research. If you have any questions or need further help, please contact OPRS at (312) 996-1711 or me at (312) 996-2014. Please send any correspondence about this protocol to OPRS at 203 AOB, M/C 672.

Sincerely,

*Sandra A Costello*

Sandra Costello

Assistant Director, IRB # 2

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects

Enclosures:

1. **UIC Investigator Responsibilities, Protection of Human Research Subjects**
2. **Informed Consent Document:**
  - a) Consent Form; Version 3; 10/14/2014
3. **Recruiting Material:**
  - a) Recruitment Script; Version 2; 09/10/2014

cc: John Huntington, English, M/C 162

Todd DeStigter (faculty advisor), English, M/C 162

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS  
AT CHICAGO

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS)  
Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research (MC 672)  
203 Administrative Office Building  
1737 West Polk Street  
Chicago, Illinois 60612-7227

**Approval Notice  
Continuing Review**

September 15, 2015

Katharine Sjostrom, M.Ed.  
English  
601 S Morgan St  
M/C 162  
Chicago, IL 60612  
Phone: (708) 253-2493 / Fax: (312) 413-1005

**RE: Protocol # 2014-0613  
"Pre-Service Teacher Identity Development"**

Dear Dr. Sjostrom:

Your Continuing Review was reviewed and approved by the Expedited review process on September 10, 2015. You may now continue your research.

Please note the following information about your approved research protocol:

**Protocol Approval Period:** September 10, 2015 - September 9, 2016  
**Approved Subject Enrollment #:** 52 (27 subjects currently enrolled; closed to new enrollment)  
**Additional Determinations for Research Involving Minors:** These determinations have not been made for this study since it has not been approved for enrollment of minors.  
**Performance Sites:** UIC  
**Sponsor:** None  
**PAF#:** Not applicable  
**Grant/Contract No:**  
**Grant/Contract Title:**  
**Research Protocol(s):**  
a) Pre-Service Teacher Identity Development; Version 1; 05/21/2014

**Recruitment Material(s):**

- a) *Study closed to new enrollment: follow-up recruitment materials included with amendment #1*

**Informed Consent(s):**

- a) *Study closed to new enrollment: follow-up consent materials included with amendment #1*

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<http://www.uic.edu/depts/ovcr/oprs/>

FAX: 312-413-2929

Your research meets the criteria for expedited review as defined in 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1) under the following specific category(ies):

(5) Research involving materials (data, documents, records, or specimens) that have been collected, or will be collected solely for nonresearch purposes (such as medical treatment or diagnosis)., (6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes., (7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including but not limited to research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

**Please note the Review History of this submission:**

Receipt Date	Submission Type	Review Process	Review Date	Review Action
08/28/2015	Continuing Review	Expedited	09/10/2015	Approved

Please remember to:

→ Use your **research protocol number** (2014-0613) on any documents or correspondence with the IRB concerning your research protocol.

→ Review and comply with all requirements on the OPRS website,

**"UIC Investigator Responsibilities, Protection of Human Research Subjects"**

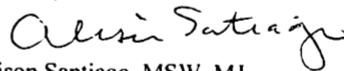
(<http://tiger.uic.edu/depts/ovcr/research/protocolreview/irb/policies/0924.pdf>)

**Please note that the UIC IRB has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.**

**Please be aware that if the scope of work in the grant/project changes, the protocol must be amended and approved by the UIC IRB before the initiation of the change.**

We wish you the best as you conduct your research. If you have any questions or need further help, please contact OPRS at (312) 996-1711 or me at (312) 355-0816. Please send any correspondence about this protocol to OPRS at 203 AOB, M/C 672.

Sincerely,



Alison Santiago, MSW, MJ

IRB Coordinator, IRB # 2

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects

Enclosure(s): None

cc: John Huntington, English, M/C 162

Todd DeStigter (Faculty Sponsor), English, M/C 162



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS  
AT CHICAGO

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS)  
Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research (MC 672)  
203 Administrative Office Building  
1737 West Polk Street  
Chicago, Illinois 60612-7227

**Approval Notice**  
**Amendment to Research Protocol and/or Consent Document – Expedited Review**  
**UIC Amendment # 1**

September 15, 2015

Katharine Sjostrom, M.Ed.  
English  
601 S Morgan St  
M/C 162  
Chicago, IL 60612  
Phone: (708) 253-2493 / Fax: (312) 413-1005

**RE: Protocol # 2014-0613**  
**“Pre-Service Teacher Identity Development”**

Dear Dr. Sjostrom:

Members of Institutional Review Board (IRB) #2 have reviewed this amendment to your research and/or consent form under expedited procedures for minor changes to previously approved research allowed by Federal regulations [45 CFR 46.110(b)(2)]. The amendment to your research was determined to be acceptable and may now be implemented.

Please note the following information about your approved amendment:

**Amendment Approval Date:** September 10, 2015

**Amendment:**

Summary: UIC Amendment #1, dated August 6, 2015 and received on August 28, 2015, is an investigator-initiated amendment about the following:

1) Re-contacting enrolled subjects who are UIC juniors or seniors for follow-up interviews. The interviews will be conducted one after each semester until the subjects' graduation from UIC and then one after each semester through subjects' first two years post-graduation. If any of the subjects register for a subsequent course English 498/499 taught by the PI, subjects will have the option to have copies of their teacher identity narratives to be retained for post-course analysis. Subjects will be re-contacted via their UIC emails with a Consent Addendum to consent to further contact, interviews, and data retention. Consenting subjects will have the option to provide their non-UIC emails so that the PI can contact them post-graduation. A waiver of consent to re-contact and a waiver of documentation of consent to allow for response to the Consent Addendum via email are requested (Protocol, v.4, 8/6/2015; pp.1, 5, 6, 10, 11, 28, 29, and 30 of the Initial Application; Follow-up Interview Protocol, v1, 8/6/2015);

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<http://www.uic.edu/depts/ovcr/oprs/>

FAX: 312-413-2929

2) Submission of the recruitment and consent documents reflecting the above (Consent Addendum Recruitment Script, v1, 6/8/2015; Consent Addendum, v1, 8/6/2015; Recruitment (script) #v3, 8/6/2015).

**Approved Subject Enrollment #:** 52 (27 subjects currently enrolled; closed to new enrollment; follow-up with original subjects only).

**Performance Sites:** UIC

**Sponsor:** None

**PAF#:** Not applicable

**Grant/Contract No:**

**Grant/Contract Title:**

**Research Protocol(s):**

a) Pre-Service Teacher Identity Development; Version 4; 08/06/2015

**Recruiting Material(s):**

a) Consent Addendum Recruitment Script; Version 1; 08/06/2015

b) Recruitment (Script); Version 3; 08/06/2015

**Informed Consent(s):**

a) Consent Addendum; Version 1; 08/06/2015

b) A waiver of consent has been granted under 45 CFR 46.116(d) for re-contacting enrolled subjects for the follow-up phase of the research; minimal risk; subjects will be provided with an information sheet upon enrollment into the follow-up phase.

c) A waiver of documentation of consent has been granted under 45 CFR 46.117 for the follow-up interviews (subjects will provide electronic consent); minimal risk; subjects will be provided with an information sheet/consent addendum for the follow-up phase of research.

**Please note the Review History of this submission:**

Receipt Date	Submission Type	Review Process	Review Date	Review Action
08/28/2015	Amendment	Expedited	09/10/2015	Approved

Please be sure to:

→ Use only the IRB-approved and stamped consent document(s) enclosed with this letter when enrolling subjects.

→ Use your research protocol number ( 2014-0613) on any documents or correspondence with the IRB concerning your research protocol.

→ Review and comply with all requirements on the OPRS website at,

**"UIC Investigator Responsibilities, Protection of Human Research Subjects"**

(<http://tiger.uic.edu/depts/ovcr/research/protocolreview/irb/policies/0924.pdf>)

**Please note that the UIC IRB #2 has the right to ask further questions, seek additional information, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.**

**Please be aware that if the scope of work in the grant/project changes, the protocol must be amended and approved by the UIC IRB before the initiation of the change.**

We wish you the best as you conduct your research. If you have any questions or need further help, please contact the OPRS at (312) 996-1711 or me at (312) 355-0816. Please send any correspondence about this protocol to OPRS at 203 AOB, M/C 672.

Sincerely,



Alison Santiago, MSW, MJ  
IRB Coordinator, IRB # 2  
Office for the Protection of Research Subjects

Enclosure(s):

1. **Informed Consent Document(s):**
  - a) Consent Addendum; Version 1; 08/06/2015
2. **Recruiting Material(s):**
  - a) Consent Addendum Recruitment Script; Version 1; 08/06/2015
  - b) Recruitment (Script); Version 3; 08/06/2015

cc: Todd DeStigter (Faculty Sponsor), English , M/C 162  
John Huntington, English, M/C 162

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS  
AT CHICAGO

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS)  
Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research (MC 672)  
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Chicago, Illinois 60612-7227

**Approval Notice  
Continuing Review**

August 30, 2016

Katharine Sjostrom, M.Ed.  
English  
601 S Morgan St  
M/C 162  
Chicago, IL 60612  
Phone: (708) 253-2493 / Fax: (312) 413-1005

**RE: Protocol # 2014-0613  
"Pre-Service Teacher Identity Development"**

Dear Dr. Sjostrom:

Your Continuing Review was reviewed and approved by the Expedited review process on August 26, 2016. You may now continue your research.

Please note the following information about your approved research protocol:

**Please note that stamped and approved .pdfs of all recruitment and consent documents will be forwarded as an attachment to a separate email. OPRS/IRB no longer issues paper letters and stamped/approved documents, so it will be necessary to retain these emailed documents for your files for auditing purposes.**

<b><u>Protocol Approval Period:</u></b>	September 9, 2016 - September 9, 2017
<b><u>Approved Subject Enrollment #:</u></b>	52 (27 enrolled: closed to enrollment, open to subject follow-up)
<b><u>Performance Sites:</u></b>	UIC
<b><u>Sponsor:</u></b>	None
<b><u>Research Protocol(s):</u></b>	
a) Pre-Service Teacher Identity Development: Version 4: 08/06/2015	
<b><u>Recruitment Material(s):</u></b>	
a) Consent Addendum Recruitment Script: Version 1: 08/06/2015	
<b><u>Informed Consent(s):</u></b>	
a) Consent Addendum: Version 1: 08/06/2015	
b) A waiver of consent has been granted under 45 CFR 46.116(d) for re-contacting enrolled subjects for the follow-up phase of the research; minimal risk; subjects will be provided with an information sheet upon enrollment into the follow-up phase.	

Phone: 312-996-1711

<http://www.uic.edu/depts/ovcr/oprs/>

FAX: 312-413-2929

- c) A waiver of documentation of consent has been granted under 45 CFR 46.117 for the follow-up interviews (subjects will provide electronic consent); minimal risk; subjects will be provided with an information sheet/consent addendum for the follow-up phase of research.

**Additional Determinations for Research Involving Minors:**

These determinations have not been made for this study since it has not been approved for enrollment of minors.

Your research meets the criteria for expedited review as defined in 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1) under the following specific categories:

- (5) Research involving materials (data, documents, records, or specimens) that have been collected, or will be collected solely for nonresearch purposes (such as medical treatment or diagnosis).
- (6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
- (7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including but not limited to research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

**Please note the Review History of this submission:**

Receipt Date	Submission Type	Review Process	Review Date	Review Action
08/24/2016	Continuing Review	Expedited	08/26/2016	Approved

Please remember to:

→ Use your **research protocol number** (2014-0613) on any documents or correspondence with the IRB concerning your research protocol.

→ Review and comply with all requirements on the guidance.

**"UIC Investigator Responsibilities, Protection of Human Research Subjects"**

**(<http://research.uic.edu/irb/investigators-research-staff/investigator-responsibilities>)**

**Please note that the UIC IRB has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.**

**Please be aware that if the scope of work in the grant/project changes, the protocol must be amended and approved by the UIC IRB before the initiation of the change.**

We wish you the best as you conduct your research. If you have any questions or need further help, please contact OPRS at (312) 996-1711 or me at (312) 413-0241. Please send any correspondence about this protocol to OPRS at 203 AOB, M/C 672.

Sincerely,  
Ibraheem Oguntade  
IRB Coordinator, IRB #2  
Office for the Protection of Research Subjects

Enclosure(s) sent as attachment to a separate email:

**Please note that stamped and approved .pdfs of all recruitment and consent documents will be forwarded as an attachment to a separate email. OPRS/IRB no longer issues paper letters and stamped/approved documents, so it will be necessary to retain these emailed documents for your files for auditing purposes.**

**1. Informed Consent Document(s):**

- a) Consent Addendum; Version 1; 08/06/2015

**2. Recruiting Material(s):**

- a) Consent Addendum Recruitment Script; Version 1; 08/06/2015

cc: Walter Michaels, English, M/C 162  
Todd DeStigter, Faculty Advisor, English, M/C 162

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS  
AT CHICAGO

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS)  
Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research (MC 672)  
203 Administrative Office Building  
1737 West Polk Street  
Chicago, Illinois 60612-7227

**Approval Notice  
Continuing Review**

September 5, 2017

Katharine Sjostrom, M.Ed.  
English  
601 S Morgan St  
M/C 162  
Chicago, IL 60612  
Phone: (708) 253-2493 / Fax: (312) 413-1005

RE: **Protocol # 2014-0613**  
**"Pre-Service Teacher Identity Development"**

Dear Dr. Sjostrom:

Your Continuing Review was reviewed and approved by the Expedited review process on September 5, 2017. You may now continue your research.

Please note the following information about your approved research protocol:

<b><u>Protocol Approval Period:</u></b>	September 9, 2017 - September 9, 2018
<b><u>Approved Subject Enrollment #:</u></b>	52 (27 subjects enrolled) closed to enrollment
<b><u>Additional Determinations for Research Involving Minors:</u></b>	These determinations have not been made for this study since it has not been approved for enrollment of minors.
<b><u>Performance Sites:</u></b>	UIC
<b><u>Sponsor:</u></b>	None

**Research Protocol(s):**

- a) Pre-Service Teacher Identity Development; Version 4; 08/06/2015

**Recruitment Material(s):**

N/A – closed to enrollment

**Informed Consent(s):**

N/A – closed to enrollment

Your research meets the criteria for expedited review as defined in 45 CFR 46.110(b)(1) under the following specific categories:

(5) Research involving materials (data, documents, records, or specimens) that have been collected, or will be collected solely for nonresearch purposes (such as medical treatment or diagnosis).

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

( / ) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including but not limited to research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

**Please note the Review History of this submission:**

Receipt Date	Submission Type	Review Process	Review Date	Review Action
08/21/2017	Continuing Review	Expedited	09/05/2017	Approved

Please remember to:

⌚ Use your **research protocol number** (2014-0613) on any documents or correspondence with the IRB concerning your research protocol.

⌚ Review and comply with all requirements on the enclosure,  
**"UIC Investigator Responsibilities, Protection of Human Research Subjects"**  
(<http://tiger.uic.edu/depts/ovcr/research/protocolreview/irb/policies/0924.pdf>)

**Please note that the UIC IRB has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.**

**Please be aware that if the scope of work in the grant/project changes, the protocol must be amended and approved by the UIC IRB before the initiation of the change.**

We wish you the best as you conduct your research. If you have any questions or need further help, please contact OPRS at (312) 996-1711 or me at (312) 996-0548. Please send any correspondence about this protocol to OPRS at 203 AOB, M/C 672.

Sincerely,

Brandi L. Drumgole, B.S.  
IRB Coordinator, IRB # 2

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects

Enclosure(s): none

cc: Lisa A. Freeman, English, M/C 162  
Todd DeStigter, Faculty Sponsor, M/C 162



## VITA

### NAME

Kate Sjoström

### EDUCATION

Doctor of Philosophy English	<b>University of Illinois at Chicago</b> Areas of Concentration: Writing Pedagogy and Narrative Inquiry	2018
Master of Education	<b>University of Illinois at Chicago</b> Concentration: Instructional Leadership	2004
Bachelor of Arts English/Rhetoric	<b>University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign</b> <b>University Honors:</b> Summa Cum Laude; University Honors/Bronze Tablet; Chancellor's Scholar (Campus Honors Program); James Scholar <b>Department Honors, Awards, and Prizes:</b> High Distinction in English; High Distinction in Rhetoric; Quinn Award (Senior Rhetoric Award); Raymond Seng Scholarship (top prize for critical writing); Friedrich Memorial Scholarship (for critical writing); Folger Adams Poetry Prize (top prize, 1995 and 1996); Thatcher H. Guild Poetry Prize	1998

### ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT

Graduate Assistant/ Instructor of Record	<b>University of Illinois at Chicago</b> Academic Writing I: Writing in Academic and Public Contexts Academic Writing II: Writing for Inquiry and Research Teaching of Writing in Middle and Secondary Schools Teaching of Reading and Lit in Middle and Secondary Schools Educational Practice with Seminar (Student Teaching Seminar)	2013-2018
Teacher  Levels	<b>Lyons Township High School, LaGrange, IL</b> A.P. Literature and Composition Creative Writing I, II, and Independent Study American Literature at Preparatory, Accelerated and Honors World Literature Accelerated <b>Leadership:</b> Curriculum Coordinator A.P. Literature and Composition Team Leader Visiting Writer Program Coordinator Literary Magazine Advisor Mentor Teacher Faculty Trainer (Anti-Plagiarism Software)	2004-2011

## **TEACHING RECOGNITION**

Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Mentoring, Honorable Mention (2016)—The Honors College and The Graduate College at the University of Illinois at Chicago  
Award of Special Merit (2011)—Illinois Association of Teachers of English, Illinois Poet Laureate Kevin Stein, and Governor Pat Quinn  
Poetry/Prose Instructor of Illinois Best Prose and Poetry (2010-2011, 2009-2010, 2007-2008, and 2006-2007)—Illinois Association of Teachers of English  
Judge—Columbia Scholastic Press Association, literary art magazine division

## **TEACHER WORKSHOPS**

Presenter, “Bridging the Divide Between Secondary and Post-Secondary Writing Instruction.” First Year Writing Program TeachWrite series. University of Illinois, Chicago, IL. 13 April 2017.

Presenter, “Gadzooks! It’s Grammar.” First-Year Writing Program Professional Development Week, University of Illinois, Chicago, IL. 15 October 2013.

Presenter, “Applying Institute Practices in the Classroom...Three Voices.” Institute for Writing and Thinking. Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY. 14 July 2011.

Participant, Creative Non-Fiction. Week-long workshop at the Institute for Writing and Thinking at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY. July 2011.

Participant, A.P. English Literature and Composition, Week-long workshop at the Northwestern A.P. Summer Institute, Evanston, IL, August 2011.

Participant, Inquiry into Essay. Week-long workshop at the Institute for Writing and Thinking at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY. July 2010.

Participant, Thinking through Narrative. Week-long workshop at the Institute for Writing and Thinking at Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY. July 2009.

## **PUBLICATIONS**

### **Columns**

Sjostrom, K. & McCoyne, J. (2017). Partnership literacies: Storying our selves. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 61(3), 331-334.

Sullivan, K. (2011). IWT in the Preparatory Classroom. *Field Notes*, 2(2), 30-34.

### **Creative Non-Fiction**

Sullivan, K. (2012). Honeysuckle. *Writing from the Inside Out*, VII, 47-50.

Sullivan, K. (2010). Images from Dutchess and Ulster Counties. *Writing from the Inside Out*, V, 39-44.

## **Poetry**

Sullivan, K. (2009). Beauty, Marrakech, The Des Plaines, On Becoming Pregnant, or The Snow, Third Trimester, and On My Fear of Baby Learning to Talk (Featured Writer). *New Scriptor*, X, 4-7.

“The Ornithologist.” *Southern Poetry Review*. Spring/Summer (2004): 35.

## **CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS**

Sjostrom, K., Bauman-Epstein, D., Bass, C. & Mayo, R. “Bridging the Divide Between Secondary and Post-Secondary Writing Instruction.” Writing on the Edge Conference, Glen Ellyn, IL. 7 October 2017.

Sjostrom, K., Jensen, A. & Morris, K. “Writing to Resist: Helping Writing Teachers Take Com(Passionate) Risks in an Age of Narrowed Writing Curricula.” Conference on English Education Summer Conference, Columbus, OH. 4 June 2017.

Sjostrom, K. “A Narrative Inquiry into Preservice Writing Teacher Development.” National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention, Atlanta, GA. 18 November 2016.

Sjostrom, K. “Re-storying to Resist: Writing Our Way to Advocacy in English Education.” National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention, Atlanta, GA. 18 November 2016.

Sjostrom, K. “In Search of Un-Divided Selves: Holding Pre-Service Teachers’ Practices Up to Personal Philosophies.” National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention, Minneapolis, MN. 21 November 2015.

Sjostrom, K. “A Narrative Inquiry into Teacher Identity and Teacher Education.” National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention. Gaylord National Resort, Washington, D.C. 22 November 2014.

Sjostrom, K. “Analysis and Revision of Teacher Identity Narratives.” National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention. Gaylord National Resort, Washington, D.C. 22 November 2014.

Sjostrom, K. “Contemporary Poetry in Grades 6-12: Developing Independent Voices, Dialogic Communities, and Critical Literacies.” National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention. Hynes Convention Center, Boston, MA. 23 November 2013.

## **ACADEMIC SERVICE**

### **Service to the Institution (University of Illinois at Chicago)**

Co-Facilitator, English Education edTPA Implementation (performance-based teaching assessment), 2014-Present.

Interviewer, English Education Candidacy Admissions, 2014-Present.

Workshop Presenter, “Thinking about Graduate School?” Undergraduate Studies in English Advising Program, November 2016.

Program Advisor, English Education, 2014-2015.

### **Editorial Service**

Graduate Student Reviewer, *English Education*, 2016-present.

### **Service to the Community**

Vice President, Board of Directors, The Children’s School, Berwyn, IL, Summer 2017-Present.

Coordinator, Academic Writing Partnership between University of Illinois at Chicago and Alcott Prep High School, Fall 2016.

Coordinator, Academic Writing Partnership between University of Illinois at Chicago English Education, UIC Writing Center, and Foreman High School, Fall 2014.

Education Advisor, Narrative 4 (international organization that facilitates story exchanges to build empathy), 2013.

### **Service to the Field**

Respondent, “The Future is Now: Exploring 21st Century Teaching Ideas with the Next Generation of English Teachers,” National Council of Teachers of English Annual Convention, November 2016.