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**Re-Embodying Our Discipline**

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**Prologue: "To Your Scattered Bodies Go"**

Mrs. Miller was the first truly special teacher I ever had. In high school, the gifted program that I had been a part of since kindergarten was merged with the English program to create a program called "gifted honors English." Everyone in the program had this class every semester all four years of high school. This was unique in a few ways. First, we had the same teacher for the same subject for every year of high school, which in my understanding is pretty unheard of. Second, not only did we have the same teacher, we had the same peers in the class every year. (No one was ever added to the gifted program in high school. I suppose it was assumed that one's "giftedness" would have been discovered prior to the ninth grade, so kids that showed promise starting in high school were sent instead to advanced placement classes). Lastly, and perhaps most tellingly, the gifted honors English class was sequestered at the very end of the north wing of the school, surrounded immediately by perpetually out-of-use classrooms on one side and a stairwell that hardly got used by anyone other than the "gifted honors English kids" (as we were deemed and known throughout the entire school) on the other. Although this larger environment may seem stifling, it was quite the opposite. Mrs. Miller's classroom was, a den, a safe haven. It was, in short, where my life first changed for the better (and, for reasons I will briefly mention later, for the worse).

To our distinct advantage, Mrs. Miller was not only the sole educator for the program but also served as its Director. Because of this, we were exempt from the standard high school English curriculum. Our curriculum was curated by Mrs. Miller for each specific class, and our classroom was run like what I would now categorize as a standard UMSL English graduate class; that is, a small group roundtable discussion. As a result of that kind of intimacy, our class was a very deeply bonded group of young people. That bond was formed through many things--our

(somewhat self-imposed) outsider status, a hunger for more of everything than what we had--but above all, that bond was formed through books. And there was no place better in the world for my devastatingly bright, world-hungry peers and myself than Mrs. Miller's classroom library.

This classroom library was for the personal use of Mrs. Miller's students, and it flipped the script on what I thought was possible for individual teachers to do inside of a controlled education system. Mrs. Miller was given a stipend to buy supplies (books) that she needed for the program, and seeing that she was also the Director of the program, she didn't have to run her choices by anyone. The administration, knowing (and wanting to know) very little about what we were doing in the gifted honors English program, never knew what exactly we got our hands on or from where. None of the books in Mrs. Miller's personal library were curricular or compulsory reading; she simply made the books available to us. If we wanted to just read from her curriculum that was fine too. But if we wanted more, Mrs. Miller provided us with a vast, seemingly unending literary territory to explore. Unlike my previous experiences, no book, no subject matter was off limits to us. There were no color-coded stickers telling us what we could or could not choose from. All we had to do was sign the book log, get our knowing wink from Mrs. Miller, and we were off. We could check the books out and keep them for as long as we wanted. I tore through classics by Dickens, Hardy, Tolstoy, Austen, and the Brontes; I rambled along with Kerouac and Bukowski and Ginsburg; I thought long and hard with Proust, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, and Kafka. I had been given the kingdom keys, and I was ravenous.

Alongside extracurricular reading from Mrs. Miller's library and our regular reading and assignments, we were all encouraged to write creatively and were given ample opportunities to do so. Mrs. Miller was the first person to truly encourage my creative writing, the first person who helped me envision a literary life for myself. She modeled for me what that life could look

like, and I never forgot that. She was the first to show me what can happen when we bring our embodied experiences into the classroom. Importantly, too, she allowed me to explore and use these experiences not only to inform my readings of literature, but also to use literature to inform my experiences. Because of this, I became very serious about my literacy activities through the gifted honors English program even as I was becoming more and more disillusioned with my formal education outside of Mrs. Miller's classroom. It is clear to me now in ways that it wasn't then that an intricate ecology was at play within that space. Texts were working on us, we were working on each other, and both dark and wondrous things were taking shape inside of us. It was as if our various mental health issues as well as our budding intellects bloomed into an exquisite, flourishing garden that year. I was severely depressed and began cutting myself. Others in my class started using drugs. Others still got in trouble for petty crimes. And yet we never stopped reading and writing.

If anything, I think we were reading and writing more, literally clinging to it, during this time period than any other in the program, even if we were following Mrs. Miller's actual curriculum less and less. We all found ways to skirt around her reading list and assignments. However, we respected Mrs. Miller enough to turn *something* in, albeit never what she asked for. She may have assigned an essay on Chaim Potok's *The Chosen* but what she received ranged from essays on Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (in my case) to Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. Amazingly, while we were regularly reprimanded, she still graded whatever we had turned in the same way she would have graded something she'd actually assigned. She provided feedback and asked us further questions about whatever it was we actually had read. Mrs. Miller trusted us enough to scrap the curriculum and put us in charge of our own learning. And when the time came, she went to bat for us.

Collectively and perhaps inevitably, our behavioral and emotional issues began to stretch farther than the boundary of Mrs. Miller's doors--far past what she could mitigate, what she could protect us from. One of our peers had an abusive father, and regularly came to class with marks and bruises. Towards the very end of our junior year, he ran away after being beaten particularly badly when his father had come home drunk. He hadn't been home in days and had been staying with some of the other boys in our class, snuck in through bedroom windows to sleep well after parents went to bed. I don't remember how, but one of us got wind that the school police were looking for our friend. It turns out his dad had reported him as a missing person in an attempt to get him home. While the cops were walking down the hall to Mrs. Miller's classroom, our friend slipped out her classroom window and ran. When the police arrived to collect him, Mrs. Miller merely stayed seated behind her desk, took off her reading glasses, and told the officers that she was sorry, but the boy they were looking for wasn't here. That was the beginning of the end.

At this point in my abridged literacy history, you may be asking yourself how all of this even relates to my thesis—but I assure you that it does. During these few years, I realized that reading and writing had many uses, first and foremost of which was that it could explain, even alter (i.e. reframe), what was going on inside my mind. Reading and writing became the primary tools I used to augment my reality and elevate my consciousness to a plane removed from my anxiety, psychosis, and crippling depression. My literacy activities helped me to recognize, diagnose, place, name, and harness my emotions. Writing helped me take my feelings and turn them into a text; a narrative, a tangible product that I could refer back to, that could study as I tried to understand what was going on inside of me. Reading helped me to understand that I was not alone. Writing about those experiences got them outside of myself, out into the world in

front of someone else's eyes. Mrs. Miller read and responded to my work. She encouraged me to keep writing. She validated me and my feelings, and in turn she taught me how to validate myself.

I'm only now beginning to realize what a profound gift she was giving us. We were all hopelessly bound together in our adolescent angst and Mrs. Miller found a way to sustain us, to build our minds and teach us resilience. Sure, her methods were unorthodox, but I think that good teaching sometimes has to be in order to do the job it needs to do, to serve the students it needs to serve. Looking back on these experiences now, I'm beginning to see just how much Mrs. Miller shaped my mind and literacy habits.

For a long time—in fact, until just recently, I hadn't thought about Mrs. Miller. Though I thought I'd left Mrs. Miller behind in high school, I now realize that that couldn't be farther from the truth. I carried her with me, through literary studies and right into composition studies. I now think not only critically, but academically about what Mrs. Miller did for our class. In that thinking, I now see wondrous possibilities and potentialities—of which I hope to explore in this thesis—about how the inclusion of embodied experiences and having access to a surplus of ways of knowing and meaning making could have helped me assuage the dissociation I sometimes felt in my literary studies. I now see how wonderful of a teacher she was, and how unvalued she was in the institution she taught in. I'm also closer to learning how to embody what I value and what I resist academically and pedagogically.

As this thesis progresses, I hope to show that the skills I learned and the literacy experiences I had in Mrs. Miller's program marked me as a person and a scholar and shaped my interests both inside and outside of the classroom. They represent some of my very first and formidable experiences with intellectual agency and purposeful resistance. It's really no wonder

that I ended up in composition studies, trying to absorb as much theory as I can into my body in hopes that I can reflect it out to others the way that Mrs. Miller did. If any of this sounds like hyperbole, I can assure you that it's not. I've tried to reflect here what it felt like for me at the time I was experiencing these literacy events. Everything that we were reading, that we were experiencing, felt so vital, so dire, and I suppose that's because in that classroom, to us, it was.

The literacy events I've described above are what sustains me as I move forward in academia, further into the education system that I bucked so much throughout my primary and secondary education. I've since found many more like Mrs. Miller: strong, wise, subversive women that have taught me—and continue to teach me—that change is not always revolutionary, but is enacted bit by bit. That change happens by chipping away at systemic practices that hinder young minds instead of granting them agency. This change is enacted through the bodies that students encounter in their classrooms, bodies found in both the seats around them and the teacher in front of them. As such, we should treat our duties as educators and peers, as those in a community, with profound gravity. Now that I've reached back and traced the history of these threads, I am more aware than ever how important those bodies and the values they model are for the thinkers and dreamers that fill up our seats.

Because of Mrs. Miller and the revolutionary teachers (all of whom are women, which seems to me to not be merely coincidental) that I've met along the way, I have started down a path that will teach me how to use my body to enact revolutionary change, even if right now it's only on a highly personal level. These women and the literacy practices they've modeled have contributed more to the shaping of my identity than I've previously been able to understand.

While I know the significant events I've recounted here is by no means the end of such events,



and while I still don't understand it all, I do know that it is my turn to learn how to be for others the type of embodied model that these women were to me.

That's not to say, however, that my trajectory on this path was a straight line—it wasn't. I would be remiss to allow this narrative to give the impression of a clean progression of events. There was a marked recursivity to my growth, a sometimes painful back and forth, and there still is. My decision to switch my area of emphasis from literature to rhetoric and composition is perhaps the best example of the recursive nature of my path. I now view my time spent studying literature at the undergraduate and graduate level as an attempt to integrate myself into the primarily cognitive system of knowledge and meaning-making that seems to me to be valued in my experiences within literary studies, while denying the lens that colors every possible knowing, every possible construction of meaning: my embodied experiences. That is to say, I tried to master the system of what I felt to be disembodied knowledge acquisition, to excel at it, often by actively suppressing my embodied knowledge and denying those embodied experiences as legitimate ways of creating academic meaning. I thought that operating in this way intellectually, academically, politically, and personally would give me agency; would elevate me above what I felt at the time were the confining restrictions of the body. And when I finally encountered my first composition studies class, I had an epiphany: that embodied experiences do not circumscribe “legitimate” ways of meaning making. Instead, embodied experiences enhance and increase ways of meaning making, providing a richer understanding of both myself and my academic studies. I knew then that I had to change my discipline.

I'd first like to say, as I hope this thesis shows, that I did begin to get the context I was searching for in graduate school. However, it took me away from literary studies. This pivot from literary studies towards rhetoric and composition was due to two events that happened

concurrently: taking my first composition studies class and getting a full-time position working for the university. I'd like to take a moment to talk about these two events and the insights that they gave me.

My experiences in my first composition class were utterly transformative, both personally and intellectually. It wasn't until I was exposed to the work scholars like that I realized the inchoate resistance and skepticism I was personally experiencing might reveal something larger than myself, something larger than my own personal experiences. This was both comforting and heartbreaking. On the one hand, it was a source of comfort that I was not alone in my feelings. On the other, it broke my heart that others were experiencing some facsimile of these events in their own undergraduate education in literary studies. More than anything, however (and somewhat ironically), this realization was empowering. The more I looked, the more scholarship I found reaffirming what I was feeling and experiencing. Concepts that had been creeping around in the liminal spaces of my consciousness, concepts that were previously shadowy and unnamed and therefore very hard to grapple with suddenly became a concrete reality for me. There was a language for this. There were names for this. There were studies and criticism on this. There was, in short, the potential for radical change.

During my time as a graduate student at UMSL I became the assistant to the university's Chief Diversity Officer in the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Because of the nature of this position, I was constantly submerged in issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion at the campus, community, and national level. Much of my job consisted of staying on top of these issues so that I could relay them to the Chief Diversity Officer as well as assist and direct anyone who called or came into our office. Staying apprised of this ever-changing information ranged from going over case files at the campus level to tracking local, national, and international events

that impacted diversity, equity, and inclusion. In my short year at that office, there were many, including continued strife in Ferguson and the wider St Louis area. We were also dealing with issues surrounding the Dakota Access Pipeline, the alt-right movement, the presidential election, the continued police shootings of young, unarmed black men, LGBTQ issues, and more. This was the first time since my experience in the classroom directly following the Michael Brown shooting verdict that what I was studying was directly related to what I was living. My studies conditioned my personal and professional life and my personal and professional life conditioned my studies. I looked harder and more critically at issues such as race, gender, class, both inside and outside of the classroom. Both my personal and academic experiences were working concurrently to shape me.

When viewed in this context, it appears clear to me that switching to composition studies marks the next logical move in trajectory through higher education. The direction that I'm moving in now—a direction that I hope to show with this thesis—shows a recursive move back to the girl that read not for the curricularly established objectives (such as historical or biographical contexts) but for the deeply personal, transactional nature of the exchange. Similarly, this direction shows a recursive move back to the adolescent girl writing to save her life, to hold out all the pieces of broken things and put them into words that matter. What I've learned since switching to composition studies is that I can have it all, I can satisfy both my emotional and intellectual needs through my academic work. I still use reading and writing to put my life in context. The only difference is that I'm no longer trying to eradicate the traces of these practices from my academic work. I no longer see the practices of my younger self as things that I need to outgrow or replace with more rigorous, strictly cognitive orientations. I now know that I can bring those practices into my classrooms and into my scholarship. What

separates me from those other versions of myself is merely time, knowledge, and the help of phenomenal teachers.

These experiences also made me realize something too—that as evidenced by the rampant acts of discrimination and violence that are played out again and again in the daily news, we must admit that “whatever the complex cultural forces at work, the result is that more of our [students]...have had difficult...traumatic experiences, and those experiences are erupting in [our classrooms], whether...sanctioned or not, overtly related to course materials or not,” (Freedman, 208). It was this realization that made me realize that I needed to look more closely at if and how these experiences are utilized in the classroom. The result of this inquiry is the following thesis.

### **Thank You for Joining Us, Please Check Your Bodies at the Door**

Undergraduate literary studies, for me, was predicated on what I’ll now define as a tradition of antagonism. This antagonism comes from a multitude of places. The constant denial of the body—of the embodied—as well as with the exclusively logocentric demands of our discipline and the practice of censoring what is and is not considered acceptable ways of knowing, writing, and talking about literature creates a nearly insurmountable antagonistic model predicated on false binaries that both teachers and students are forced to submit to and work with. There are a plethora of antagonistic practices present in my experiences with literary studies, from the antagonism that arises from the false hierarchy of knowledge(s) and ways of knowing that I felt forced to impress upon myself in order to be successful in our discipline, to distinct practices of colonialism in literary studies’ research and scholarship. These antagonistic experiences, prescribes limited, unnatural ways in which I was permitted to talk and write about-

-and therefore how I was able to interact with—the texts that I studied. I know that the following discussion of the antagonistic practices I experienced is by no means comprehensive. However, I hope that this discussion will allow us a broad enough view to encompass not only my antagonistic experiences in my undergraduate career, but also to potentially even point towards some larger underlying themes and trends of antagonism in literary studies overall.

“To teach a survey course in literary theory,” Rita Felski claims, “is to induct one’s students in techniques of suspicious interpretation” (28). What has resulted through repeating this continued “hermeneutics of suspicion” (28), for me, was a debilitating antagonism. In this case the antagonism was defined as a warring between individuals, where one wrote to win an argument and destroy the opposition as opposed to creating a dialogue that encompasses multiple possibilities for interpretation. Texts are slippery, and must be unpacked, again and again. And it was clear to me in many of my classes that I (and my peers) were not capable of truly unpacking them. Even with secondary criticism to help us, we learned that even those texts may evade “true” understanding. In other words, all texts that we encountered—even our own papers and response can, and will be, constantly done and undone. While the slipperiness of texts, the seemingly limitless possibilities of interpretations and reinterpretations may be comforting to some, I found it an intense site of antagonism. It felt as if I was constantly trying to think of something original to say about a canonical text while also being told that everything that can be said about a text can already be said and that professional scholars were the only people whose criticism counted anyway. Every paper I wrote in my undergraduate literary studies was, for me, an endless hashing and rehashing of other people’s scholarship, other people’s ideas. This led to an entirely different site of antagonism.

My experiences showed me that there was also an antagonism due to the particularly insidious type of colonialism present in literary studies' scholarship. According to Shari Stenberg, the current system of placing speech and listening in binary opposition...prevents the "cultivation" of knowledge and dialogue and instead promotes the "hunting" or "appropriation" of ideas that ultimately "capture[s] and destroy[s]...another's words or ideas" (252). She goes on to say that this "antagonistic model...infuses academics and the academy that harbors them with power that normalizes the seizure, appropriation, and ultimate discarding of others' ideas to propagate knowledge without true understanding" (Stenberg, 252). I can say from my personal experience that this is certainly what it felt like I was doing whenever I had to write a research paper (or any paper including secondary texts) in my undergraduate career. I felt very much like I was hunting for snippets in secondary texts that would bolster my argument and throwing away the rest of someone else's hard work. I was taught to read for what I needed and disregard the rest. As a result, I couldn't tell you really what other scholars' arguments about literary texts even truly were aside from the few cherry-picked quotations I'd collected to cobble together my own (appropriated/stolen) literary knowledge. I started to realize these practices of appropriation amounted to a colonization, an insidious offshoot of the antagonism. When I became able to see this in my own work towards the end of my undergraduate career, it made me absolutely sick. I longed for a different model.

However, it seems to me now that to truly move away from an antagonistic model of literary studies to a dialogic one, we need to implement the necessary changes using a multi-dimensional, multimodal approach. The most efficient first step to this transition, I think, is to reframe the way we think about knowledge and meaning-making. As I have tried to show in the preceding portions of this thesis, literature is taught, in essence, as if it exists in a vacuum. Texts

are sterilized, washed clean of the *contemporary* bodies that handle them and from the communities that house them. They are washed clean of the personal, grossly decontemporized, and largely dehistoricized. The irony here, is that students are taught that they cannot read a text from *nowhere*; and yet, they also cannot read a text from just *anywhere*. The result of this seemingly irreconcilable conundrum is that as a discipline, we proscribe the creation of new knowledge(s) and new ways of knowing by narrowly, rigidly confining and defining the spaces we deem acceptable or valid for the study of literature. Asking students to navigate these narrow spaces, asking them to devalue their embodied, lived experience—what they *know* in their bodies to be true—in order to fit the spaces our discipline considers legitimate is another source of antagonism.

Of course, we cannot reframe the way we think about knowledge and meaning-making without recontextualizing how we view our physical bodies in relation to the pursuits of literary studies. We must acknowledge that any pursuit of the mind is also a pursuit of the body. Our bodies literally house the organ that make our logocentric traditions possible. Any act of thought, any accrual of knowledge, any sort of meaning-making occurs *in* the body and consequently cannot be foreign to nor separated from the body. Therefore, “as long as the scholarship in question concerns humans and is written by humans...nothing human should be alien to it” (Freedman qtd. Berube, 202). The body, with its lived experiences and personal insights, should not be a stranger to literary studies. Yet, in my experiences, it was.

I believe that teachers and students’ devotion to our discipline is not merely because of a text. It’s because of what a text *does* to us when we read. So while our devotion to literature signifies a reach outward toward texts, it also importantly marks a reach inward towards ourselves. It’s significant that we tell students that fiction is a study of the human condition.

And yet, it's deeply ironic that we do not validate scholarly pursuits that probe and entwine resonances of our own personal and collective experiences of the human condition with the literature that we study. It would be absurd to deny that this resonance between our embodiment of the human condition and its manifestations—our recognition of its traces in and movements within texts—did not lead us deeper into literature and eventually to this discipline. Our denial of this impoverishes our discipline by severely limiting the kinds of knowledges and meaning making that can not only *occur* in our classrooms but also be *validated* in our classrooms and in our discipline.

Ultimately, if we do not serve the whole student in our epistemologies and our literary (and literacy) teaching, we are rupturing the self in numerous ways, and therefore fundamentally tampering with the psychological, spiritual, and physical health of ourselves and our students. This tampering will follow everyone it touches out of the classroom and manifest itself in the personal, professional, and civic relationships and duties in which each exposed individual is involved. This is the antithesis of the duties of creating literate citizens. Admittedly, this assessment sounds downright apocalyptic. But is there a way to bridge the “unbridgeable chasm of [literate acts] inside and outside the classroom” (Felski, 30)? I think so. It starts with the body, and I'll show you how.

### **“You're in my body/that's where I think about you”: What Embodiment is and Why it Matters**

Embodiment is a complex web of interrelated phenomena. Explaining it is messy; there are no fine lines sketching boundaries, no steady demarcations of separation between one definition and another. But in this thesis I will define embodiment as *lived experience*.



However, I understand that to define it as such seems too simplistic, seems too much like trading one indefinable term for another, but that's as close as I can get terminologically. I think this is because embodiment—lived experience—exists in many ways outside of the realm of language. That is to say, when we experience things, we experience them on a pre-linguistic, multi-sensory level that we must later translate into language or text in order to share these lived experiences with one another. After all, words are merely a system of symbols created to share images; to share felt senses and experiences; and ultimately, to share meaning. “Imagery,” scholars like Kristie Fleckenstein tells us, is “the matrix of all thought...[and]...images [are] the precursors, the necessary ground for all deliberative thought” (12-13). Therefore, any attempts to represent embodiment using language alone will result in a derisory conception of what it means. So I'll use the only tool I have in this faulty medium—language—to try to cobble together a more specific definition in hopes to at least catch at the essence of embodiment.

I see embodiment as the real-time playing out of a human life inside of, around, and through an individual. That is to say, human life plays out *through* embodiment. I conceive of embodiment as a highly individualized experience, because of each person's positionality, subjectivity, and bodily ecologies, shape how we know, what we know, and how we make meaning. Yet, because we are all human, there are inevitably similar themes that play out in our lived experiences as humans (i.e. the human condition). And while there are such inevitable similarities, no two individuals will ever have the same lived experiences. That is to say, they will not experience their lives in exactly the same way, even if the conditions and events that occur within their lives are similar or even identical. Rather, because we are embodied, because embodiment constructs every aspect of our living and knowing, we are not and cannot be the same.

To further explain my conception(s) of embodiment, I will align my thinking and my definition of embodiment with the work of Kristie Fleckenstein, specifically her proposal of “imageword” as an imaginary of embodiment and a poetics of teaching. As Fleckenstein conceives of it, her term “imageword” illuminates the “circular play [of the]...corporeal [“is”] logic of image and the discursive [“as-if”] logic of word” that, through its dynamism, creates a recursive loop that marks and unmarks boundaries, creating a complex, ever-transmogrifying “ecological system of meaning” (12). What is especially important is where these boundaries play out. Fleckenstein envisions this ecological system of meaning created by the interplay of “imageword” being played out amongst four networked pathways: “bodies, families, communities, and cultures” (38). There is no one site in which we can pinpoint meaning being made. As Fleckenstein’s concept of “imageword” shows us, meaning-making is not just cognitive, but always embodied, and always playing out around, within, and through complex feedback networks that are inseparable. Meaning, then, is comprised of many living, moving parts and many living, moving bodies. When viewed in this way, it is easier to conceive of meaning-making being housed in the body, if for no other reason than the fact that the dialogics that make meaning are inseparable from the body.

Of course, my coming to this definition of embodiment was, perhaps obviously, not only because of the scholarship I was exposed to, but also because of my lived experiences. It is my hope that my embodied experiences as an undergraduate student in the literature program at the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL) can help provide a discernible impetus for the reason of writing this thesis as well as orient the reader to the potentially larger implications this thesis may indicate for our discipline. While UMSL may instantiate the discipline, my embodied experiences and interpretations of this instantiation cannot be, nor should they be, representative

of the whole discipline. If nothing else, my embodiment, my experiences, has led me here, to these thoughts, to this place where theoretical, abstracted thinking begs to be wedded to my own concrete embodiment. My hope is that in integrating theory and my embodied experiences I will be able to “see and re-see...[to] situate and re-situate...experience” (Anderson and MacCurdy, 15); to recognize and re-cognize, as Regina Paxton Foehr puts it; ultimately, to place my experiences in a larger social framework, thus illuminating a fuller, more nuanced, complicated, meaningful understanding of my experiences. For the purposes of this paper, it is perhaps better to approach the upcoming questions and incongruities I have come to see from my undergraduate experiences in certain (but not all) literature classes as I have come to see them as a result of my graduate studies in composition and rhetoric in this way: as experiential instead of theoretical, as embodiment as opposed to abstraction. To do so, I’d like to offer what I’ve come to see as one of the most profound experiences in one of my undergraduate literature classes as a guiding touchstone to this thesis. I’d like to share that lived experience--not only the narrative facts but also what it *felt* like--with you now.

### **Shit Gets Real: “Let’s see what Baldwin has to say about that.”**

We are only a few weeks into the semester and a few miles down the road from our campus, Ferguson is on fire. As we file into class, our bodies and minds are heavy with images of militarized police, tear gas, and fire. Heavy with the weight of Michael Brown’s body on Canfield Drive. Heavy with the verdict of “not guilty.”

I watch my classmates file in from the back corner of the room where I usually sit. I see slumped shoulders and tired eyes. I see a tightening of the muscles of throats that could mean the holding of breath or the beginning of a scream. As more people arrive we dutifully turn our

desks inward to make a circle. This isn't unusual for a workshop setting, but today it is so hard to do. To face each other. It is so hard.

The room is relatively diverse when taken as a whole, but groups are broken up almost exactly by ethnicity. I take off my dirty, black knit cap partly out of shame, partly out of respect. I am uncomfortable in my white body. I force myself to glance away from my chipped nail polish; force myself to look a few friends and many more strangers in the face. It is clear we are waiting to be told what to do. It is clear we do not know what to do. Our bodies fidget, our muscles tense, but we are silent.

The professor arrives and although we see his tall frame is slumped into itself like ours, we relax. We know that it is his job to guide us, and we have faith that he will. Today especially, we are willing to be led. We know that as soon as we start our discussion about today's readings, we can slip safely into the confines of talking about literature—confines that would lift us out of our bodies. We can turn away from images of another dead young black boy left to lie in the middle of the street for four hours. We can turn away from the real and move into blissful abstraction. For the next two and a half hours, surely, we thought, we can pretend that this isn't happening in our community.

That is not what happened.

On this day we would be discussing James Baldwin's "Notes of a Native Son." This essay concerns itself with both the death of Baldwin's father and the Harlem Race Riots of 1943. From the first page of the essay, we were met "a wilderness of smashed plate glass...[images of] the spoils of injustice" (87). The room fills with a pressure that is both palpable and indescribable. Suddenly, we aren't talking about the riots in Harlem anymore. Suddenly, we

aren't in 1943. We are talking about the riots in Ferguson, down the road from our very classroom. We are talking about right here, right now.

That indescribable, palpable pressure in the air heats up. Atoms and emotions create a terrible frisson, a frightening frenzy in the classroom. On an instinctual, bodily level, somewhere before cognition, I know what is about to happen. "Between pity and guilt and fear I began to feel like there was another me trapped in my skull like a jack-in-the-box who might escape my control at any moment and fill the air with screaming" (104). I don't even have time to wonder if spontaneous combustion is really even possible before the room explodes.

My heart begins to pound. A black girl near the corner of the room starts crying. I look around and I see grimaces, wide eyes, and knuckles white with clenching. A black man is shaking his head slowly. I can barely hear him repeating, "No, man. No." Looking at him, I realized then that seeing "life and death so close together, and love and hatred, and right and wrong, said something to me which I did not want to hear concerning man, concerning the life of man" (110). It was enough to make me want to rend my clothes and weep.

Our professor leaned casually on the desk, his tall frame softened by the angle, his arms stretched wide, holding on to the edges of the desk. His knuckles weren't white from clenching, but it was clear to me he was casual in bodily posture alone. His eyes—one brown, one a mix of ochre and blue, scrutinized everything that was unfolding. Every muscle in my body was tensed in some instinct to avoid danger, but the longer I kept my eyes on the professor, the more I understood. I understood that the professor was letting this discussion happen because it needed to happen. Because it *wasn't* happening in other classrooms. Because we had real bodies in this classroom, bodies that were participating in the protests, bodies that lived in Ferguson, bodies whose livelihoods were now ruined buildings on "ruined street(s)" (90).

But there were also privileged bodies, privileged minds. A young white girl—the youngest in the class—sat with one leg flopped over the top of her desk and the other tucked beneath her. Her voice suddenly raised above the others, unintentionally echoing Baldwin’s father’s, questioning why “if they had so much energy to spare, they could not use it to make their lives better?” (92). “Why,” she asked, “would they set their own community on fire?” I held my breath and didn’t let it out for what felt like an impossibly long time. The black man who kept shaking his head no and repeating his mantra started saying it louder. He’d later tell me he was tired of explaining, tired of being the angry black man in the room. We could all see how tired he was, even without him saying a word.

The professor, probably sensing the potential danger of the question, stepped in. “Well,” he said, “Let’s see what Baldwin has to say about that.” He directed us to the page and read the answer aloud in his slow poet’s voice: “None of this was doing anybody any good. It would have been better to have left the plate glass as it had been and the goods lying in the stores. It would have been better, but it also would have been intolerable, for Harlem had needed something to smash. To smash something is the ghetto’s chronic need” (111). He paused and looked at the girl before swiveling his eyes to each of us. The classroom went still and quiet as these lines from the text sunk in. And I’d like to think that’s where the magic happened. It’s not that we resettled back into the text—though in a way, we did—it’s that we were using the text to inform our current, sociopolitical and sociocultural lives; our own personal, lived experiences. And the effect was powerful. I won’t lie and say that class returned to normal, that we weren’t still angry or in pain or both. We were. But I’d like to think with the professor’s deft perceptions and guidance and Baldwin’s timely essay, we came to a place of understanding that was both bodily and intellectual. This place felt right and true. It felt seamless and whole in a

way that was intoxicating and foreign--and absolutely necessary. And at the end of class we left, Baldwin kicking around in our heads, still trying to understand our community on fire.

### **Texts Informing Bodies, Bodies Informing Texts: The Transtemporality of Reading**

I believe that texts move with us through space and time—they move with us through our selves and worlds, informing and shaping these same forces. Therefore, reading is not merely an isolated cognitive act. Rather, as I hope to show, reading is embedded and embodied in a vast web of context, making when and where we read a text a critical facet of meaning-making and knowledge. That is to say, when and where we read a text, as well as who we are when we read it *matters*. The “when-,” “where-ness,” and “who-ness” that I’m referring to here is much more complex in nature than it may appear. By “when,” I don’t simply mean a month or a year. It’s not that I don’t mean those things—they are important temporal markers too—but more specifically, I’m talking about local, communal, personal, and even national events. Similarly, by “where,” I don’t mean only a physical place. I also mean where we are as people, as families, as communities, as a country—the list goes on. Correspondingly, by “who-ness” I mean who we are as individuals both in each moment and in each phase of our lives. Each of these facets informs what happens in our body while we read, forming a complex web of reactions, both within and outside of our consciousness, that influences our cognition and the way(s) we are able to make meaning from the texts we read.

When we combine this with the notion that every individual student who reads also consists of their own profound individualized relationships and ecological structures built around, within, and outside of the texts they read, the implications, potentialities, and knowledges that can be illuminated in our classrooms are breathtaking. The best way for me to

fully explain this is, or at least to show how all of these facets can be in action in our classrooms (and they are, all the time), is to recall the classroom scene from chapter one of this thesis. If we look at this labyrinthine web of “when-” and “where-ness” just within this specific event, we can see many (but certainly not all) of the complex ecologies at play—ecologies that neophenomenological, postcritical, and transactional reading could help illuminate. For starters, the “when-ness” of reading Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son” is incredibly important to the resulting classroom event. As individuals, as a class and as a community, at the time of this reading, we were post-Michael Brown shooting, post-Michael Brown shooting verdict. We were post-Trayvon Martin shooting, post Trayvon Martin shooting verdict. We had already seen and were still seeing young black men being shot by police on a terrifyingly regular basis. We had witnessed the rise of Black Lives Matter, and then All Lives Matter, and then Blue Lives Matter. We were beginning to feel the vile rising of the alt-right. We witnessed the Ferguson riots and national protests. When we sat down to read Baldwin’s essay, all of these things and more were simmering in our conscious and subconscious minds. They impacted the way we read Baldwin’s words, influenced our cognition, and provoked some pretty visceral emotional responses.

And that’s just at the classroom level. At a personal, individualized level, the “when-ness” and “where-ness” were infinitely complex. I do know some of my classmates had lost friends and family members to gun violence. I do know that some of my classmates, both black and white, lived in Ferguson. I do know that some of my classmates, again both black and white, were participating in the Ferguson protests and had been for some months now. But because of this infinite complexity, and because of the personal, individual nature of these experiences, I cannot even begin to unpack each person’s place in the classroom that day. I can, however, take



a look at my own “when-” and “where-ness” when I read “Notes of a Native Son.” By doing so, I hope to give one tiny example of what can manifest in an individual student in the seat.

At the time of this classroom event, I had never read Baldwin’s “Notes of a Native Son” before, though I had read plenty of his other fiction and nonfiction pieces. I was a white, lower-class, genderqueer, neurologically atypical person who was older than many of my undergraduate peers. I felt more comfortable with the graduate students in the class than the undergraduate students, which isn’t saying much, considering I’d never been in a mixed-level class before and I was terrified of the graduate students. I’d never had a class with this particular professor before, and I only personally knew two people in the very full class. I was painfully aware that I benefited from white privilege, though I tried to the best of my ability to shirk that privilege. All of these things influenced my classrooms interactions and behaviors and none of them are insignificant. While I can’t specifically accurately recall nor recreate my aesthetic reading experience, I can say that it was heavily influenced by what was happening in Ferguson. The connections between what was going on there and what was going on in the texts were haunting and this conditioned both my reading experience as well as my classroom experience. The images and sounds and stories from Ferguson were working on me and the images and sounds and sights of the Harlem Riots as described by Baldwin were working on me as well. And just because of my own positionality, my own subjectivity, I was working on both of those things too.

Every student in the room had their own reading experience with the text and their own lived experiences with the events in Ferguson and the rest of their lives that they are bringing into the classroom. And the reason why this class was so significant for me was because it was the one and only time in my undergraduate education that all of these ecologies and conditions

were brought front and center and acknowledged. We were all unprepared for such a situation, but I believe we all learned from it. What I'd like to imagine though, is that if embodied practices such as neophenomenological, postcritical, and pragmatic reading—which I'll explain and define in more detail below—were already present, is that we might have learned more. We might have done more work in that moment. We might have done more work after that moment too.

### **Looking Forward by Looking Back: A Note on Intent**

What I experienced in class that day as a junior undergraduate was a singular event, unlike the unfortunate social and historical event(s) that created the classroom atmosphere that day. It was a class unlike any other I had ever experienced. For one of the first times, my learning carried a strong component of embodiment. Our professor showed us how the literary text we read could inform, complicate, and add further meaning to our lived experiences. I was hooked. I spent the rest of my time as an undergraduate chasing that feeling—the feeling of the literary and personal and academic all fusing together in a beautiful, complex matrix where meaning is made. What started that day in class after the Michael Brown shooting verdict proved to be an unquenchable thirst to connect my studies inside our discipline to my outside experiences. I wanted a framework that would help me understand what I was seeing in the world around me, what I was experiencing outside of the classroom. I looked everywhere for signs of the merging of embodiment and academic scholarship in my classes. This tireless pursuit continued for the remainder of my undergraduate career and often, though not always, ended in disappointment. I was left with lingering questions. Where were all of our bodies

while our minds sat in class? Why couldn't I feel them? How, I continued to ask myself, could this be?

It wasn't until graduate school that I was introduced to composition theory and studies that allowed me to truly begin to tackle this question. With the introduction of composition studies to my heretofore purely literary education, I suddenly had access to and began to acquire language for and access to the larger frameworks that could be used to express and potentially explain my skepticism, my questions, and my doubts. Scholars like Jackie Jones Royster, Gesa Kirsch, Thomas Newkirk, and Mike Rose, among many others, opened up frameworks such as feminist rhetoric, working class students, first generation students, how our minds are made for stories, and what kind of power systems I might be up against. And once that door was opened, the reasons for my disappointment with some of my undergraduate experiences became more and more clear.

To begin a conversation as to the potential reason for this disappointment, it feels pertinent to explore what I *felt* were the current hegemonic teaching practices and general beliefs in Literary Studies. In doing so, my hope is that this critique will illuminate the potentially harmful effects of these current practices and beliefs for our students, our teachers, and our discipline, at least as I experienced them. I'll pull heavily on my own personal experience to bolster my assertions, as I don't mean to condemn an entire discipline. For the purposes of this discussion, I will use my lived experience in conjunction with scholarship that I encountered during my graduate career to help bolster and frame my assessments. I approach this endeavor in the spirit of inquiry and self-assessment. I will be joining the conversation of the scholarship that I am pulling from, but because of the highly subjective, embodied nature of this account, I hope that the reader can keep in mind that my subjectivity and my interpretation of that

subjectivity is no one else's but my own. My desire is to examine my own sense(s) of irreconcilability and dissociation caused by the imposed binary between academic, literary pursuits and personal, embodied experiences in some of my literature classes. My overall goal of this pursuit—of integrating my lived experience with academic scholarship—is to complicate and expand my own understandings of some of my undergraduate experiences in literary studies. In this way, my goals are very personal and very subjective. By putting my embodied experiences into a larger social and academic framework, and by placing them within and alongside related scholarship, I'm hoping to both inform and make sense of my own experiences. In addition, I hope that this thesis reads as an experiment in executing the kinds of approaches I'm advocating for. It is, in other words, an exercise in performative, embodied scholarship.

### **“Done because we were too menny”: The Commodification of Literary Studies and its Effect on the Body**

The most obvious place to start this discussion of the practices of literary studies is to ask ourselves what the goals of literary studies actually are. That is, what is it our discipline is supposed to be *doing*? What is the study of literature supposed to *do*? For us? For our students? For our society and culture? For the world? Why do we carry these texts forward? Why do we teach them? How do we teach them? What for? These questions continue to be poked and prodded by those in our discipline to no unanimous resolution. And if we don't know exactly *why* we're perpetuating a discipline, system, or tradition, isn't continuing to do so without reflection inherently dangerous?

While there is a myriad of scholarship that applies to my concerns, and while it may technically fall outside of the purview of this thesis, I'd like to take a moment to reflect on and

position the goals of the institution of higher education. I do so in with the hope that a brief overview will provide both grounding, positionality, and context of the tensions within the higher education as a whole and with our discipline as a part of that larger system. Currently, major trends in this discussion define the purpose of the university at large to be centered around these nearly synonymous principles: “‘education for democracy,’ ... ‘education for civic engagement,’ ... ‘education for citizenship,’ ... [and/] or ‘democratic liberal learning’” (McDonald, 144). In other words, the purpose of the university is to teach citizens how to *be* in their communities and in their worlds. The origin of this purpose I believe, is housed within the vision that the university should reflect the community that it is in. That is to say, their connections and relationships should be virtually seamless, mutually beneficial, and above all, *recognizable* to everyone in that community both inside of and outside of the university. This is a noble goal, surely, and one that theoretically can be accomplished via any major or any general education regimen. However, noble goals do not always fit the needs of a consumer-based capitalist culture—especially when it takes lots of money to run a university. Herein lies the problem.

Universities, and therefore consequently (as well as more specifically), the humanities, no longer have the luxury (if they ever really did) of “expand[ing] knowledge for its own sake” (144). Instead, to justify higher education in our society and to keep people coming in the door, we assume that the university “needs to serve a goal external to itself” (144). This external goal is generally translated to the idea that having a degree from an institution of higher education will guarantee one a better job post-graduation. And while that may have been true once, it’s certainly not the case anymore. Regardless, the goal of the university is still predicated on this faulty assumption. What happens as a result, in my opinion, is the commodification of

education. In other words, under this consumer-based construction, the student becomes a customer to be served, and everyone wants to get their money's worth. In the end, higher education becomes a finite material object to be obtained for a price.

This is, of course, an oversimplification of a complex situation, but for the purposes of this thesis, I hope it will suffice. If we keep this overall model in mind, along with the fact that while our discipline may have other, at times contradictory goals than those of the institution of higher education, it becomes clear that the humanities (and inevitably our discipline) must subsist within and participate in this model, if nothing else than for the purposes of funding and resources. Thus, literary studies defined, contained, and imparted to the consumer in concordance with this model. So what does that look like at the disciplinary level?

In order to discuss this, I'd like to take a look at Paulo Friere's concept of the banking model of education. This particular work of Friere's holds particular resonance with me because it articulated and described a framework that made sense of my inchoate stirring of misgivings about the experiences I had throughout my undergraduate career in literature studies. I'd like to take a moment to discuss this banking model of education in detail not only because it so clearly and eloquently frames and makes sense of my experiences, but also because I feel it may be pointing to potentially larger trends and tensions in our discipline and higher education at large.

The banking model of education is, as Friere describes it, a narrative relationship in which teachers serve as the narrator, or Subject, and the student as listener, or Object. In this model, "the student records, memorizes, and repeats [what is narrated to them, and essentially]...turns them into 'containers,' into 'receptacles' to be 'filled' by the teacher" (106). The problem with this, as I experienced it in some parts of my undergraduate studies, is that students are placed in the role of non-active, passive agents in the learning process that must

adapt to and retain content without having the agency to influence their learning experiences.

This is dangerous Friere explains, because

“the more students work at storing [these] deposits, the less they develop a critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world...[and] the more they tend...to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented of reality deposited in them...[and] fail to perceive that the deposits themselves contain contradictions about reality” (109-110)

Friere mentions that this benefits the institutions and power systems that created and sustained this model of education, which for me jives with McDonald’s conception of higher education as a finite, contained, material commodity of late capitalism. Thus, this model serves to enact the tenets of higher education as capitalist commodity, and by keeping students in the passive, subordinate role, the banking model of education helps maintain the equilibrium of the status quo.

In my experience as an undergraduate student, it appears plain to me now that this banking model of education was, whether knowingly or unknowingly, at play in some classrooms. It’s most obvious to see when I look back at the mode of transmission of the current dominating curriculum: the literary canon. The transmission of the literary canon is perhaps the most entrenched tradition of our discipline, as well as the most stagnant. Despite the rapid socio-cultural, political, environmental, and historical evolution that has taken place—and continues to take place—since our discipline’s inception, it’s been my impression that what literary studies has chosen to value has not changed as dramatically as one would have hoped. (Or at least not as much as I would have hoped). As such, the practices that surround the transmission of the literary canon pose the most danger to the longevity and vibrancy of literary studies going

forward. In addition, despite huge leaps in the understanding of learning and meaning-making, it has been my experience that the ways in which some instantiations of literary studies transmits canonical and disciplinary knowledge to undergraduate students have not fully utilized these theories. Instead, my experiences suggest that students were vessels meant to contain disciplinary knowledge without truly understanding its larger sociopolitical, sociocultural, or even its personal, embodied, highly individualized contexts. It was also my experience that for the most part, undergraduate students were not considered to be active participants in the meaning-making and learning process of the classroom.

The impact of this banking model of education is reflected in the way that undergraduate classrooms operate, the way that knowledge is transmitted in the classroom, and the kinds of knowledges that are permitted in the classroom. In regards to classroom operation, most undergraduate literature courses (especially the lower-level courses) are lecture-based survey courses. What this means is that knowledge about a text is simply transmitted to students. And while the lecture-based approach allows students and teachers to maximize the amount of information and disciplinary knowledge transmitted, there are also major drawbacks. Their input and class discussion does not shape the disciplinary knowledge that is transmitted. Survey courses are designed to cover broad swathes of literary history in relatively little detail and shallow depth. Indeed, undergraduate survey courses sometimes felt more like a painfully long exercise in the memorization and regurgitation of canonical and historical information.

**I don't know what I don't know...or do I? The Importance of How We Conceive of Knowledge**



In my experience in literary studies, an admission of a lack of knowledge was literally looked down upon. In my experience, I felt that I absorbed through implication that to admit a lack of knowledge about the text or context was intellectual weakness. I felt that we were assumed to already have the contexts, to already understand the texts. It became clear to myself and some of my peers through classroom discussion and instructor/student interactions that for many of us, it felt like there was no way to ask in earnest. To do so would at best derail our tightly scheduled syllabus, and at best make others question our disciplinary intellect and ability. Intuiting this threat, I stayed silent, because of fear of being outed as intellectually incompetent and shame from not already knowing.

Fear and shame manifest themselves in other traumatic ways in some of my undergraduate classrooms as well. Is that it has been my experience that when discussing or analyzing any text, bringing up the personal in the form of anecdote or embodied, lived experience automatically damages your credibility. There is almost always a quiet but decidedly palpable shift in a classroom where the personal was brought into the discussion of a literary text. I have seen those who I would consider “more knowledgeable” students cast sidelong glances at each other or stifle a smirk. This has been, at least, my experience and perception. I would be lying if I said I myself, the (at the time) well-indoctrinated student that I was, hadn’t closed my eyes to keep them from rolling in these situations. The assumption underlying these classroom interactions—albeit arrogant—is prevalent: people that bring up the personal in discussion do not know what they are talking about. Coinciding with that assumption is the unspoken consensus that people who *do* know what they’re talking about—“real,” “serious” scholars and students—don’t need to resort to discussions of the personal because they have more keen and “important” insights and critiques to present. This is damaging to any classroom

and any student on both the receiving and the perpetrating end of this exchange, but it happens. I have seen (and participated) in it, not knowing then what I didn't know.

Yet, we were all novices that came to the discipline without built-in disciplinary knowledge. All we came to class with as undergraduates (especially as freshman taking survey courses), was only our embodied, personal knowledges and experiences of literature, of our culture, and of our own lives. In regards to literature, we had the knowledge of the *feeling* of our reading experiences, because we lived what it felt like to experience literature within our own bodies in a certain place and at a certain time. We gained our knowledge, in other words, by being affected by our lived experience. These knowledges and experiences—these *feelings*—were undoubtedly no small part of what led us to literary studies in the first place. As I've shown above, unfortunately, we quickly learned that this type of knowledge (our personal expertise) was not valued by our chosen discipline and learned to act accordingly.

It often felt to me that by the time we were seated in the classroom, we were essentially non-active, non-generative participants in our seats; our only function appears to be absorbing disciplinary knowledge and traditions. Instead of learning how to integrate and synthesize literary and disciplinary knowledge with our personal experiences and our own unique ways of knowing, I felt that we often became merely vessels for disciplinary knowledge, absorbing the already made meaning(s) by discipline-approved scholars. Our personal experiences with the texts have been left at the door. And it is here that the personal becomes impersonal, the embodied experiences of the students in our seats stop mattering. Divorced from meaning, it is here I began detaching myself from my body in order to gain disciplinary knowledge. With no clear way to integrate literary studies into their lives outside of the classroom—with no real idea that literary studies even *can* be integrated into their lives and selves—it felt as if my (and my

peers') only option for successfully navigating our discipline may be a total dissociation of self, a total denial of our lived experiences and our worlds outside of academia. In other words, it is here that I became a ghost, listening to dead work from dead writers from a dead past.

If all goes as some classrooms, teachers, and pedagogies seem to plan, students have fulfilled their duty of obtaining the "intellectual baton" (Miller, 11) that has been passed to them. This intellectual baton exists because of "an institutional ideology which posits scholarship as a progressive series of 'gains' in knowledge...and scholarship, gains in professional status...[and] gains in prestige" (Willard-Traub, 45-47). This model of accretion, however, begins and ends at the doors of our discipline. Students leave our seats without any clear idea of what they are supposed to *do* with the baton. If they are not also taught how to extrapolate the knowledges that been passed to them to enrich their own understanding(s) of themselves and the world, if they cannot find a way to embody, contextualize, and apply that meaning to their own positionality in their own lives; that knowledge, once gained, is useless. If the knowledge students acquire by studying literature cannot be used by them for anything outside of academia, perhaps even outside of separate and discrete classes, it is a (dead) knowledge that serves no formal outlet but its own masturbatory purposes.

I owe much of my rhetorical thinking concerning knowledge, learning, and pedagogy to Elizabeth Ellsworth, particularly her book *Places of Learning: Media, Architecture, and Pedagogy*. Because my debt to her is extensive, I find it worthwhile to detail her work, delineating how it applies to my lived experiences during my undergraduate career as well as how it applies to this thesis specifically. "Knowledge, once it is defined, taught and used as a 'thing made'" Ellsworth says, "is dead" (7). In other words, when conceiving of knowledge as a made object that is meant to be obtained by following a finite series of accretions--whether those

accretions take the form of a book read, a syllabus finalized and followed through, or a course completed; or, in the case of our professors, an article published in a discipline-respected journal or book or a tenure granted—we are ignoring the complex systems that allow this “accretion” to occur in the first place. What we are left with when we subscribe to this model is knowledge devoid of context, devoid of self-awareness.

When trafficked as a commodity, as Ellsworth suggests, we are left with muted, stagnant product drained of potential (8), separated from the complex ecologies and systems that allow these processes to occur in the first place. If we let go of knowledge as a fixed, immobile object to be obtained and instead view knowledge and meaning-making as an active, ever-evolving, vibrant *thing*—we can conceive of knowledge as something that is never completely “made,” but always in the making. If we pivot away from hierarchies that place “objects of experience over subjects of experience, the rational over the affective, and knowledge as a tool for prediction and control over learning as play and pleasure” (9), imagine the knowledges, and selves that would become available to our discipline, our professors, and most importantly, our students. Such a posturing would make us rich in unforeseen possibilities.

Based on my undergraduate experiences of curriculum and pedagogies as well as the work of other scholars, again including but certainly not limited to Ellsworth, it is clear that some faculty and scholars may erroneously (and to great detriment) conceive of our discipline as a “thing made” instead of a thing constantly in the making. This is problematic for a multitude of reasons, but the most consistent underlying issue, in my opinion, is the complete severing of literary studies from the outside world. This severance terminates the ability for students use their lived experience and outside knowledge to inform their studies. Likewise, their education in literary studies becomes harder to apply to their lives outside of the academy. Their accrual of

disciplinary knowledge—without any potential or clear purpose outside of the mere act of its being obtained—becomes abstract, and unable to inform a student’s life outside of academia. If indeed we are to create literate citizens—one of the most agreed upon outcomes of our discipline in particular and higher education at large—as it stands now, there are some facets of our discipline that does not accomplish this. The knowledge that can be gained from undergraduate literary studies under this construction is not a thing that will help students fully contextualize their selves, their lives, their places in the world, or their own subjectivity; nor will it allow them to fully conceive of their intersubjectivity. But I don’t think this has to be the case.

I believe that remediation is possible, and I believe that an important part of this remediation between our students, our professors, and our discipline lies in how, exactly, we represent and account for our discipline to the students in our seats. For undergraduates especially, I think we need to explore with them what it means to be in a discipline in general and the discipline of literary studies specifically.

### **Is There a (Con)Text to this Class?: The Need for Consistent, Frank Discussions About our Discipline**

For me, much (though not all) of my undergraduate experience amounted ultimately to learning how to analyze, read, write, and talk about “great” canonical words in very limited and rigid ways. I know that my conception of the discipline as an undergraduate was completely convoluted. And for me, this convolution was due largely to the fact that we did not have conversations about what it means to be in a discipline, specifically the discipline of literary studies. But I think it’s time we start. It certainly would have helped me to be having regular, earnest discussions in my department as well as some of my classrooms about what our

discipline *is*, what it *values*, and what it *shuns*. I would have helped me to be talking about its problems, its inconsistencies, amongst ourselves, both students and teachers. Ideally, included in this conversation would be a discussion about the often disparate goals of the university and our discipline. Giving me a sense of the complexities and contradictions would have benefited me greatly, and I suspect the same could be said about many of my peers. Ultimately, I believe that such an orientation would empower me as a student by allowing space for regular opportunities to take stock of my beliefs and measure them against the discipline's and the university's beliefs. These discussions are integral in placing literary studies and ourselves in space, time, and place. In doing so, it would have helped me move outside of the vacuum in which literature is sometimes taught and closer towards the ability to integrate my inner and outer lives with the knowledges inherent in our discipline.

Along with discussions about what it means to be in the discipline of literary studies, I also believe that discussions about subjectivity and bias would have been very beneficial to me. It would have helped me to have known that bias is inherent in everything and everyone, and is reflected in what we give value to—what we elevate and what we suppress. The problem with the secondary criticism assigned in some undergraduate literary studies is that it is not contextualized within or juxtaposed against conflicting scholarship. Bias is not discussed with undergraduate students, and secondary criticism is not placed within the complex web in which it actually exists. Undergraduate students are sometimes taught—intentionally or not—through presentation of certain pieces of meaning-making and knowledge(s) and omission—intentional or not—of conflicting narratives and interpretations, that there is a singular or in some rare cases a nominal selection of “correct” ways to interpret and talk about any particular text. It is here that a problem arises.

Additionally, while there were surely theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings to each literature course, (which consisted of survey courses for freshman and sophomore students and more genre-specific offerings for juniors and seniors), these underpinnings and frameworks were not made overt to the students, even in a generalized way. Undergraduate students were never explicitly told about pedagogy at all, let alone the pedagogical practices going on in their classrooms. I myself heard the word perhaps once or twice as an undergraduate student, and always in passing. However, in my experience, pedagogical undertakings differed from classroom to classroom with no discernible “master framework” (at least at the student level) for the totality of our classes to be housed under/within. Without any disciplinary or pedagogical context in most classrooms—without even a simplified version—I believe that my undergraduate experience of literary studies was, in a way much more apparent to me now, impoverished.

In effect, I felt like we were merely there. We read. We discussed. But I didn’t know or understand *why* we were doing what we were doing; and for me, that lack of understanding provoked a fair amount of confusion, inundation, and stress. It seems to me that if I had been given an explicit understanding of our pedagogies, even an abridged version, it would go far to provide context into not only what we were doing, but *why* we were doing it. That information would have helped me (and potentially others) orient myself and the texts I was studying within our discipline, as well as help me place them conceptually and rhetorically in space, place, and time. It would have, in other words, grounded me more fully into our discipline, in my experiences, and therefore, within my own body. Thus, pedagogy would have provided me with vital context, and context would have given me a richer understanding of my discipline as well as my embodied relationship with my discipline and the texts I was studying. Without this

context I often felt essentially adrift, detached and disconnected, drowning in the esoteric, unable to place myself and my literary studies in my body and, therefore, my inner and outer worlds.

### **Black Mirror: A Word of Caution about the Potential Foil to an Education in Literary Studies**

While it's absurd to assume that undergraduate students would have obtained incredibly esoteric disciplinary knowledge *prior* to them attending our classes, somehow it seems that some faculty and instructional methods still do. It certainly feels like some in our discipline want students to be presented to them ready-made, pre-loaded with information that they simply have not had access to until now. In addition to that, it feels that some seem to assume that when students walk into classrooms, they are magically scrubbed clean of the outside world, impermeable to any influences outside of our discipline. These assumptions force students to try to separate their intellect from their bodies in order to succeed in some literature classrooms. Intentional or not, this tension plays out time and time again as acts of violence for the students in our seats.

To continue to force these unnatural bifurcations of mind and body and cognition and emotion, among other dangerous binaries, is to force another kind of education on students entirely. Scholars like Rita Felski claim that the education we're giving our students isn't just a literary one, or even just an intellectual one. "Becoming a critical reader," Felski claims, "means moving from attachment to detachment and [finally]...to disenchantment" (30). Our students then are experiencing much more than a merely intellectual education. They are, as Felski illuminates for us, also receiving a "sentimental education:" one in which "intellectual rigor is equated with deft acts of defamiliarization" (30), one in which the mind and the body are



irrevocably split, one in which the detached intellect of *logos* is upheld as a paragon of mastery in literary studies and personal, *pathetic* embodiment is seen as ineptitude. While I continued to prove that I was capable of absorbing and participating in such rigor and such bifurcation; and while I may have wanted to count my ability to participate as a success, I must also acknowledge the underbelly of such an education. It appears to me that somewhere along the line of my undergraduate literary studies, I was taught to forsake my body, taught to quietly consume the “product” that I had paid for. I must also concede that I was not prepared for the unintended side effect(s) of such an education: psychic violence. And yet that’s exactly what I wish someone in our discipline would have prepared me for. I wish someone would have told me that being and staying intellectually engaged and emotionally detached involves some pretty intense emotional labor. And that this labor has a price; a price that I, not the discipline, will have to pay for with my own body.

What’s worse is that, because of the touted outcomes of higher education, I believed that I was gaining academic and professional currency by excelling within the system, that I would be rewarded for my suffering, my assimilation. Unfortunately, that wasn’t the case. It turns out that the psychic, embodied price I paid for a bachelor’s degree in literary studies has merely given me a *diminutive* and *provisional* place at our discipline’s table. (Considering the overall reality about the real-life job market outcomes of having a bachelor’s degree in just about anything, I now know this is a fairly common phenomenon.) In order to progress from a baseline novice practitioner in literary to something more—especially if I wish to stay within the academy and especially if the current model of higher education continues—I will have to repeatedly (and to greater and greater degrees) continue to inflict psychic violence on myself. I will have to get better and better at holding the cognitive and affective, the intellectual and personal, at constant

disparate opposition to one another. And when it's all said and done, I may inadvertently even teach a new generation of undergraduates to do the same thing to themselves. Like it or not, that is the negative, the foil, that an education in literary studies left behind within me.

### **There's a Room With a View, and We're In Good Company: A Space for a Rhetorical Reconception of Literary Studies**

Realizing that there is a problem is always the first step. At our best, I believe our discipline is aware of our problem(s), though perhaps unable to truly remedy them due to the nature of the beast that is commodity based higher education. At our worst, we're oblivious and complacent; steeped to the point of bloating in tradition. In reality, I think that on average our discipline errs toward the best and for the purposes of this thesis, I'll assume so. And even if the makeshift (admittedly simplistic) spectrum I've posited here is at least partially true, and if my assumption of literary studies' place on that spectrum is even partially true, a conclusion becomes clear: our best is not enough. It's no surprise to any of us that merely analyzing and lamenting a problem does little in the way of actual remediation. Awareness only gets you so far. Unfortunately, in my experience, I have not seen literary studies take that next crucial step, the step that ends up making the difference: action.

I find it deeply ironic that our discipline studies the historical context of the literature taught in the classroom, and lines of questioning aimed at the social/cultural/political hierarchies and dichotomies within the text are rampant in our discipline. Among an indefinite multitude of questions are: Who gets/has the right to speak? Who gets to make-meaning and who gets meaning made for them? Who gets to move—physically, emotionally, intellectually—and where? How is power circulated? How does a text subvert or reinforce hegemonic social and

cultural structures present in the time of its writing? These examples are not definitive; various iterations abound in classrooms, taking different shapes depending upon the particular interests and areas of study of the professor. These are good questions—questions we should be asking. However, the irony I'm perceiving within this practice stems from two different, albeit related, places: 1. in the fact that we do not carry these same questions (or facsimiles/variations of them) into our immediate present to see how a text can help inform, challenge, or provide insight into our current personal, social, cultural, moment(s) as well as the institutions and power structures that create our current environment. 2. We do not use this same line of questioning to look at our tradition and pedagogies, at the teaching of our discipline to the students in our seats. But what would happen if we did?

Not only do we see the problem, we as a discipline also acknowledge that there's no view from nowhere—that everything is constructed, even the self. Propitiously, in this case, we are already primed for action. This is in large part because some scholars are already using the questions that our discipline sanctions when analyzing texts to interrogate the rhetorical conception, traditions, and pedagogies of our discipline. Luckily for us, this means that much of the scholarship that posits ways forward already exists, and much more continues to be written into existence. The *deconstruction* has been done for us already. And because of the popular disciplinary belief of postmodern constructivism (i.e. that everything is constructed), this means that everything can be *reconstructed*. This is, as I hope to show in this thesis, no little cause for rejoicing. It is, in short, a beacon of hope.

Due to our fortuitous positioning with readily available scholarship, it's now becoming clear to me that literary studies' problem may not be one of not knowing *what* needs to be done to chart the path forward, but rather *how* to implement such changes into our personal

pedagogies, classrooms, departments, and discipline as a whole. Therefore, it does little good for me to call for a radical reconception of our discipline from the ground up--as much of the scholarship in existence already does--without positing practices that make such a reconception a reality. So for the remainder of this thesis, I will work to illuminate what I feel to be reasonably implementable practices that have the potential to make these theories a reality. It's important to note that I have no intention to speak for our discipline as a whole nor to suggest that these practices need to be implemented across the board. Rather, I'd like to identify and reflect on practices that would have potentially helped me integrate my lived experiences with the experiences I had as an undergraduate student in literary studies.

### **I Sing the Body Electric: A Pragmatic Step Towards a New Embodied Rhetoric**

To remedy these acts of violence, regardless of the acts intent, it seems to me that some may need to rhetorically reconceive of how they view their students. It seems clear to me that some probably very rarely think of students as always becoming, always making meaning and developing ways of knowing that are forever in transition and never static or complete. Some even more rarely think of students as contributing members of our discipline, capable and willing to partake in meaning making and actually adding meaning to our field. Instead, it's been my experience that sometimes students are not part of the meaning-making process in literature studies at all. They are, in some cases, conceived of as silent subjects in their classrooms, seated there to merely absorb canonical and disciplinary knowledge; not to join the conversation, add their own contributions, or participate in any way that is taken seriously by their professors. They are locked in the subject position of "student": forever subordinate, forever looking to their professors and other "acceptable" authority figures for knowledge that they are told is not their

own. And because they don't have the tools or the impetus to connect canonical text with their contemporary, personal live, they are right: that knowledge is not their own—it belongs to a collective, faceless, shapeless “someone” else.

Equally as importantly, some teachers and methods of teaching literary studies need to see our students and our professors as real people, with minds and bodies and lived experiences that are just as complex and messy and contrary as any literary character's that we may be asked to analyze in our studies. However, unlike with literary characters, with our students and our professors the consequence of misinterpreting these minds and bodies and the multitudes they contain and are capable of has dire consequences. If there is an affectual relationship between meaning-making and knowledge and embodied experience (and there is) and if students are constructing knowledge and making-meaning based on what they experience in classrooms (which they are), what are we teaching them? By not accounting for these embodied webs of interrelation in our discipline, we can literally alter lives. As I have shown, I think, the consequences of that are not always good. So this is the reality that we must face: not accounting for how meaning(s) and knowledge(s) are actually made can (and does) damage not only our discipline, but the very real flesh-and-blood students in our seats.

### **“I am. I am. I am.”: Reading Practices that Integrate and Reaffirm Embodied Experience**

Of all of the scholarship that I've read since beginning my graduate studies in rhetoric and composition, I've chosen three practices to discuss in this thesis that I believe would help bring embodied, lived experiences back into the classroom as well as mitigate feelings of dissociation and detachment. And while I cannot necessarily prescribe these changes for implementation across our discipline as a whole (though I do think it couldn't hurt), I can say

that knowledge of these philosophies--as well chances to practice and integrate these philosophies with more traditional canonical and disciplinary knowledge--during my undergraduate career would have been beneficial to me.

I think that scholars like Rita Felski posit a pretty solid rhetorical place to start by offering her take on neophenomenology. This means, among other things, reorienting and reframing how we conceive of meaning being made through acts of reading.

Neophenomenology then, as Felski conceives of it, asks us to “[delve] into the mysteries of our many-sided attachments to texts...to clarify how and why particular texts matter to us...[and to examine] the intricate play of perception, interpretation, and affective orientation” (31) that comprise integral parts of our reading experience and therefore our intellectual comportment.

An orientation towards neophenomenology would allow students “to reflect on rather than repress their engagement with what they read” (32). It is a way to examine what affects us in a text and why. By practicing neophenomenology, what we are invoking is a blend of the intellectual and the personal by reaching outward toward the text and its place in the world and also inward towards our own lived experiences. To foster a space where lived experience counts as informed knowledge and personal interpretations of a text and are validated would create new meanings and ways of seeing that everyone could benefit from.

Along with neophenomenology, another (albeit related) practice that would have helped me was postcritical reading. Felski argues that by and large, texts in literary studies can be read it two ways: critically or uncritically. Reading a text critically is the type of reading that I described in chapter one: logos-centered analysis. Uncritical reading, then, is set up to be a practice of essentially mindless reading, where the reader is attuned to neither critical nor emotional analysis of texts. But isn't there always something else going on every time we read,

even if we try to suppress it? Even if this unspoken and largely unaccounted for “something else” is prelinguistic or even precognitive in nature? That’s where postcritical reading comes in. “Postcritical reading,...or reflective reading...harnesses the intellectual and theoretical curiosity associated with critique to develop more compelling and comprehensive accounts of *why texts matter to us*” (34, emphasis mine). Introducing a healthy practice of postcritical reading would move us toward a more dialogic model of instruction in that the false binary between critical and uncritical reading would be broken by a third, much more broadly applicable option.

Postcritical reading as a facet of neophenomenology would also help to highlight the transtemporal nature of texts, which is important to understanding *why* literary texts matter. Postcritical reading accounts for the temporality of reading. It accounts for the knowledge that when and where we read a text matters.

Lastly, Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional approach to reading—sometimes called pragmatic reading, sometimes more specifically referred to as aesthetic vs. efferent reading—aligns with and enhances the both aforementioned practices as well as “fuses the cognitive and the emotive” (Flynn qtd. Rosenblatt, 106). I will briefly define aesthetic and efferent reading, but what I’m most interested in is Rosenblatt’s overall rhetorical conception of transactional reading. “In what she calls ‘efferent reading’ (24), the reader focuses on public meaning; in aesthetic reading, on the lived activity of reading” (Flynn qtd. Rosenblatt, 105). The primary difference then between aesthetic and efferent reading is temporal. Efferent reading is concerned primarily, Rosenblatt states, of the “residue” (Flynn qtd. Rosenblatt, 106) that is left (i.e. the information, the impression, etc.) after a text has been read. She notes that efferent reading, or extraction reading, is the primary mode of reading in literary studies and she’s quick to note that aesthetic reading is the missing piece to reading in literary studies. As I’ve mentioned elsewhere

in this paper, what happens to a person as they are in the act of reading is incredibly important. Attuning ourselves to recognize and analyze those emotive and cognitive interactions and reactions is what aesthetic reading is all about. To read aesthetically is “to enjoy literature...[and] to partake of its therapeutic powers” (CITE) It’s clear then that readers, for Rosenblatt, have both intellectual *and* emotional needs; who “thinks as well as feels” (109). If we fostered those needs—if students were encouraged to practice both efferent and aesthetic reading of literature—“they would,” according to Rosenblatt “learn from [literature] and build better lives on the basis of it” (107).

This type of reading would also change the ecology of the classroom. To see how these types of readings would compound and layer already complex classroom ecologies, we need to know how Rosenblatt conceives of the transactional relationship between a reader and a text. It is important to note that for Rosenblatt, the transactional relationship between a reader and a text is not strictly linear. Rather, it is “a situation, an event at a particular time and place *in which each element conditions the other*” (105). Her position makes space for many potential factors that affect the reading transaction to be considered, such as personal, “historical, social, and political factors” (108) to name a few. This points to a complex ecological structure where multitudinous conditions act on, with, around, and through the reader and the text alike.

### **Complicating Writing Practices in Literary Studies**

In addition to augmenting the reading practices of literary studies, a reorientation of writing practices would have helped me greatly, specifically where personal scholarship is concerned. The classroom can be place where not only reading, but writing can work “to construct alternatives to the life we have been living...a place to see and re-see...and to situate



and re-situate...experience” (Anderson and MacCurdy 15). The more time the writer spends integrating their personal, lived experiences into their writing, the more time they spend shaping and crafting the narrative of their story, the more control they have over their experience of it. As the writer gains control, they can then reframe their experience and gain further control and mastery (Foehr, 342) over their experiences and their scholarship.

However, I also don't believe that anything goes in literary studies writing either. I owe much of my thinking about the boundaries of personal academic scholarship to Candace Spigelman. Spigelman also warns that the misuse of personal reference in personal academic writing can have disastrous results. In order to stave off disaster, she imposes a caveat to the use of the personal in academic discourse, albeit a simple one: that personal writing in an academic essay be appropriate. What Spigelman means by “appropriate” is that the personal evidence or anecdote used in academic discourse must serve the purpose of the argument. Not only must it serve the purpose of the argument, by doing so it should be beneficial to both the writer and the audience. By making sure the personal reference is working to serve all parties involved (the argument, the writer, and the audience), the personal can be relegated to the realm of evidence. Thus, in order to successfully employ personal reference in academic discourse, the writer must understand the rhetorical necessity and impact that the personal reference will have on the argument, the audience, and ultimately, the credibility of the writer.

In addition, Spigelman places a caveat specifically on the instructor that allows personal academic discourse in their classroom and must ultimately review and grade said discourse. This caveat is much more dire, and much more necessary: the instructor must always be aware of their position of power and authority. They must be mindful of personal value judgements against the student writer, and consistently check themselves to make sure that the discourse is viewed as a

text, and not as a reflection of the writer's personal life or character. By viewing the discourse as a text, there is a level of dissociation or detachment that occurs, and works to separate the student from the personal academic discourse and the teacher from the personal life of the student. Educators are one of the gatekeepers of discourse, and as such agents they must work to ensure their students agency through equitable instruction. This equitable instruction is not only teaching students how to use personal academic discourse as evidence as well as a rhetorical device, but also an act of personal accountability on the part of the instructor to ensure that they are not creating inequitable situations or subject-positions for their students.

Ultimately I, like Spigelman, think that instead of perpetuating the binary of personal vs. academic writing—instead of perpetuating an either/or exclusionary mentality—that we teach our students to “live with contradictions” (xvii). That is to say, we and our discipline should live in the inclusive, grey area of the “or.” By doing so, we open up the possibility for “richer and more complex understandings of the issues we choose to investigate” (xvii). I want to take that a step further. By accepting the “or” of personal academic discourse, we open up a space for diverse voices to come to the table, join the conversation, and claim agency in an academic space that historically would not be open to their voices.

### **There is No Ending to This Story: Looking Ahead**

When I take all everything presented here in this thesis as a whole, that if we do not integrate the personal into our epistemologies and the teaching of literary studies teaching, we could potentially rupture the self in numerous ways, and therefore ultimately tamper with the psychological, spiritual, and physical health of ourselves and our students. This tampering will follow students out of the classroom, and manifest itself in the personal, professional, and civic

relationships and duties in which each individual is involved. This is the antithesis of the duties of creating literate citizens. This antithesis specifically makes the situation—and the establishment of the personal in literary studies—an especially dire one. Without a new imaginary to restructure our epistemologies and literacy teachings we will continue to struggle (and furthermore to teach this struggle) to convey pieces of ourselves and our historical, personal, social, and cultural experiences without all the tools we need to do so.

I believe that the best way to enact these changes is to embody them. This embodiment begins with what students see at the front of the classroom: the professor. Like Diane Freeman, what I'm endorsing when I invoke personal, performative pedagogies "is connection, between student and subject, teacher and student, reader and writer, student and student, coursework and the work of the discipline and the world" (Freedman, 199).

The truth is that there's no way to shut out the personal. Embodied experiences, including our biases and prejudices, influence and inform our learning and, therefore, the students in their seats. Our embodied experiences influence and inform not only the students, but the pedagogies at play in the classroom as well. Some scholarship suggests that teachers will teach students how they were taught themselves. I think this gives us all the more reason to be aware of our pedagogies, aware of what we're valuing and what we're oppressing. As institutional gatekeepers and models, we must embody the changes that we wish to see. Most importantly, we can't forget that our decision to invoke performative pedagogies is not a singular event. It is, as Brenda Daly reminds us, a choice that "must be made again and again" (Freedman qtd. Daly, 206).

Regardless of where students are in their education—whether undergraduates or graduates—access to a fuller, more differentiated and dynamic repertoire of practices to use to

support meaning-making can only bring about positive consequences. My belief is that the three practices I outlined in chapter two can help undergraduate students not only navigate literary texts and literary studies, but also their identities, and their worlds. My hope is that someday these practices, or some comparable facsimile of them, will be instituted in *every* classroom. Somehow, fittingly, there seems to be no way to end this thesis; and yet I must. I will end, then, by saying that I hope our pursuits to be better, to do more, both inside and outside of the academy, never ends.

### **Epilogue: Again, Today--Reflections on the embodied experience of writing this thesis**

Figuring out how to end this thesis has been a source of anxiety for me since this project's inception. I dreaded having to write a conclusion, to find an ending that could tie up concepts that were so intricate and complex. It wasn't until the penultimate moment of this process, my thesis defense, that I realized that I don't *need* a conclusion. Rather, I realized that I *couldn't* write one. In fact, to conclude such a project would falsely imply a definitive ending to this and similar endeavors, which would fundamentally defeat the kind of work that I am advocating for. What I'd like to do instead is to take a moment to place the embodied experiences I had during the writing of this thesis into context. In order to do this, I'll first examine the embodied struggle of writing this thesis. After that, I'll discuss the breakthroughs I had during my thesis defense. Finally, I'll take a moment to talk about how these breakthroughs shaped my revision process and helped me redefine success for this project.

Writing the first draft of this thesis was the hardest thing I've ever done, and I believe the reason for this has very much to do with the location of my physical body and my embodied experiences during the creation of this first draft. As I mentioned earlier in my thesis, the

“when-,” “where-,” and “who-ness” of reading a text matter greatly. Prior to this project, I’d only ever been aware of experiencing the kind of transtemporality I’m referring to when reading. I’d never spent long enough on a writing project until now to really understand that writing, especially the same thing over a long period of time, has the same embodied characteristics of transtemporality as reading. I discovered through my embodied experiences that the “when-” “where-,” and “who-ness” of *writing* a text matters a great deal as well. This may seem obvious, but to me, this realization was nothing short of revolutionary. I’d like to take a moment now to explain to you, the reader, about the embodied experiences that shaped this thesis.

Shortly after I elected to do a thesis process, I found out that my partner and I would be relocating to Portland, Oregon. When I sat down to begin writing this thesis, my physical body was suddenly thousands of miles away from the social, communal, and intellectual support that I had grown so accustomed to during my five years at UMSL. While I knew that the physical bodies I encountered and communed with were important, it wasn’t until I felt the stinging lack of their presence that I truly realized how important they were to my ability to do my intellectual work successfully. And while I still communicated with professors and peers that were integral to my intellectual and emotional development, these communications were via email or phone, and therefore strictly textual or verbal. I no longer had access to the embodied, multi-modal, multi-sensory events that helped me make meaning and glean knowledges that weren’t strictly cognitive.

Throughout the research phase of this project, I’d become accustomed to hours-long face-to-face meetings with my thesis advisor where we worked collaboratively to synthesize information, think aloud, and talk about our personal lives and experiences. During those meetings, there wasn’t a moment when cognitive and embodied weren’t colliding, fusing, and

adding to the texts and work we were doing together. This change in physical location and embodied experiences nearly caused this project to fail at multiple junctions. My extreme physical isolation virtually halted my writing for long periods of time. This physical isolation proved virtually debilitating to me at a time when I needed it most, and I felt it deeply—to the point of mourning—when I suddenly found myself isolated and trying to do this incredibly hard work essentially alone.

Preparing for and going in to my thesis defense proved taxing not only intellectually, but also taxing on my physical body as well. I had a panic attack the night before, replete with bouts of nausea, a racing heartbeat, and trouble breathing; which amounted to me going into my thesis defense on a whopping two hours of sleep. It was unpleasant to say the least, but in retrospect I'm oddly grateful that it happened that way. As distressing as it was at the time, I can now look back and see a further kind of embodied evidence that supports my way of thinking. As strange as it may seem, this incredibly bodily experience was spurred by my cognition. It was an embodied reaction to my thoughts. I was grounded fully in my body and although it was an unsavory experience, it showed the irrefutable, inseparable interplay between mind and body and the complex web of interrelativity that creates meaning and knowledge and constitutes an experience.

The morning of my thesis defense, I was in a bodily, emotional, and intellectual state of terror until I was able to “enter” the room and see my professors seated at the table. I knew these professors. They knew me. I saw them seated casually, smiling, sharing muffins, surrounded by the ephemera of our discipline. And even when our conversation turned from pleasantries to business, their physical presences continued to exude stability and reassurance, not fear. Even though I was still technically two-thousand miles away and connected via telepresence, what's

important for me to emphasize here is that unlike a strictly textual or verbal experience, this meeting had—for all intents and purposes—the same characteristics and benefits of a face-to-face meeting. I was still getting knowledges and meanings culled from my embodied senses, not just my cognition. I believe that this aspect is the key to what marked my thesis defense as a turning point for this entire project. After months of working in extreme isolation, it felt as if I was back in my English department, having another one of those long conversations about life and learning that I'd come to rely on for so long. I truly believe that I slipped so easily into these old habits and cadences because I was able to see my professors.

My thesis defense ended up not being a defense at all. It was an embodied exercise of collaborative scholarship, of communion, of respect, and of minds at work. What arose during those two hours changed not only the shape of this thesis, but also my conception of how successful I'd been previously with this scholarship or could be in the future. In this space, with these bodies, I could share my embodied experiences of isolation and defeat throughout the course of this project and pose my problems and sticking points. My committee illuminated my blind spots for me, and I in turn was able to verbalize through my physical body as well as my cognitive abilities what I wasn't quite able to get onto the pages of my thesis. We collectively lamented and shared embodied experiences with academic scholarship, which in my experience we so rarely talk about in academia. All aspects of our discussion was fluid, disjointed, and at times incoherent—much like the thinking mind—but the collective impact of our discussion left both a surplus of knowledge as well as a residue that would change the shape of my thesis entirely.

I was able, during the course of my thesis defense, to reconcile a lot of points of tension that I'd been feeling; tensions that, no doubt, were due in large part to the embodied experiences

I had as an undergraduate students, as I discussed earlier in this thesis. I realized, to my chagrin (and I'm sure to my committee's complete lack of surprise), that I was trying too hard. I had tried so hard to have this thesis be so many different things: serious, academic, representative of "me," that I'd been fighting my natural inclinations, my embodied, felt sense the whole way. I'd put so much pressure on this thesis as *the* final, culminating project to my graduate studies that I'd been fighting letting this project move. I was, in short (and to no one's surprise but mine) my own worst enemy. My own fears, insecurities, and embodied notions of what a thesis "should" be and "should" look like confined my project to an unnatural, unsatisfying shape and structure-- a shape that from the beginning was never my own.

My thesis defense also helped me realize that I kept forcing the shape and agonizing over this thesis because there were deadlines to meet and I was scared of not having "permission" to let this project take shape organically. Being able to have an embodied, dialogic conversation with my committee about my work helped me re-frame, re-see, and re-cognize the structure of my thesis from a series of overwrought, discrete parts that I was insisting on slamming together into a more loosely defined structure that was focused instead on my entire concept and experience. This dialogic conversation helped me realize how collaborative these projects are. I finally believed that collaboration is not cheating. It was, in fact, a necessary, embodied aspect of academic scholarship.

This dialogic, collaborative conversation also brought about, in my opinion, what ended up being one of the most important moments of the defense. When I'd first started graduate school, a professor who now sat on my thesis committee asked me why I would get my Master's degree at UMSL when I could have gone somewhere else. I didn't have an answer for her then, at least not one that I could verbalize. But suddenly, sitting in that defense, I knew. I told her



that I finally had an answer to her question; an answer that turned out to be evident in my embodied experiences during my graduate education and, I hope, in this thesis. “I wasn’t done learning with all of you,” I said. These social and intellectual relationships, I went on to explain, have enriched my learning as well as my intellectual and emotional intelligence. I knew intuitively that if I went to a new university where I knew no one and no one knew me, the chances of me being able to develop the intellectual and social relationship that would provide fertile ground for my growth would be scant. I’d spent years, literally, cultivating my relationships and UMSL and I believe those relationships are in many ways more valuable to me—to the kind of person I want to be and the kind of scholarship I want to do—than any text, scholarship, or disciplinary knowledge that I’d been exposed to. Where my body is matters. Who my body is with matters. My body is directly, inextricably implicated in the work that I’m able to do. Learning, for me, has always been a deeply social endeavor, and it seems that even when I was unable to consciously realize or verbalize that, I still intuitively chose situations, spaces, and people that would enable me to thrive.

My thesis defense was, in its very essence, the kind of academic experience I have been advocating for this entire time. I stated this during my defense, as well as my exuberant surprise that this is how my defense turned out to be. My thesis advisor responded to my incredulity in her steady, assured, patient way by synthesizing for me: “Reading and writing are living in bodies, which is what we’re doing right now. Even if we can’t give you a muffin.” I realized then that the work my thesis is trying to do—the work that I’m trying to do—isn’t over. In a moment of meta-cognition, and with the help of my extraordinary thesis committee, I’ve realized that the paths that I’ve taken in my life as well as the arcs of my education are embodiments that are constantly alive within me. I couldn’t have had any of these realizations or insights without

what I went through, even the things that I now critique. I also couldn't have done any of this without the amazing women I've learned with, around, and through during this leg of my journey. So instead of ending this project, I will instead continue to play out this embodied journey without the expectation of a finite end result. Instead of the singular, neat ending the academy so often asks for, I will accept only infinite inconclusions. I will rise every morning, accept that proffered muffin, and say to my mind and my body: again, today.

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