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REFLECTIONS ON THE EATING OF BOLOGNA
SANDWICHES: A MEMOIR

by

BENJAMIN RAPHAEL

A master's capstone project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2020

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Reflections On the Eating of Bologna Sandwiches: A Memoir

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BENJAMIN RAPHAEL

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Reflections On the Eating of Bologna Sandwiches: A Memoir

by

BENJAMIN RAPHAEL

Advisor: Jason Tougaw

Reflections on the Eating of Bologna Sandwiches is a memoir project intended to give light to my experiences teaching in a small public school located in the South Bronx. These experiences are directed to a general “second” person who takes the form of “you” and is intended to act as a general stand-in for the student population of this school, similar to the “you” used by James Baldwin in his seminal work “My Dungeon Shook”. This “you” is meant to breakdown the wall between the reader and the student population, allowing one to occupy another and in the process develop a heightened sense of empathy and a renewed interest in social justice or, at minimum, a perspectival shift as regards public education. My hope is that with this memoir I can dislocate the importance of the teacher from the knee-cap that is the teacher-memoir and reposition it with a focus on a generalized student; the new “hero” of the genre. In doing so, I explore themes of economic and racial justice, pedagogical theory, and socioemotional behavior within schools and throughout teacher-teacher, teacher-student, and student-student interaction. Like bologna, these interactions are not first-choice, particularly nutritious, or always 100 percent true and yet, like a bologna sandwich, they do offer a strange and unique flavor, rooted in nostalgia, capable of making those who eat it better suited to choose something different in the future.

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To my students, my colleagues, my advisor, and my friends. Thank you.

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CHAPTER 1: Conceptualization Rooted in Personal History

I've always hated the act of teaching and learning, but only in its most explicit form: the centralized teacher, as if on a podium; the relegated student, sublime in their elevated state of rapt attention. This is the historic model of education, the traditional system of Voltaire's *Candide* or Ramón Menéndez's well-received *Stand and Deliver*. It seemed so strange to me to sit in a high school History class and be talked to about democratic ideals and principals, about how individuals gathered to discuss topics of great importance and made collaborative decisions in the face of hardships, all while sitting, hands folded, in a state of absolute silence. Or, even better, to read through Plato's dialogues and see such conversation played out in real-time, such interactive acts of teaching and learning, again in silence, disallowed even the occasional whisper to a fellow classmate.

This is all to say that I greatly disliked my public education. In fact, when my guidance counselor asked "How will you measure your success moving forward?" I smirked and said, "As long as I'm not a teacher, I won't have failed." I just couldn't get it. What were teachers doing that a search engine, that a book, couldn't do? What even was the student's role in the classroom? I felt closer to an animal being tamed than an active participant, a true individual engaged in their education. I was so thoroughly disillusioned with schooling that it was to the point where I was unsure if I would even go to college. More of this? Perhaps it would be better to roll my sleeves up and get to work; a vision that now seems hilariously cartoonish, naïve, and rooted in an American Imagination that is better at "paving streets in gold" than redistributing it.

Still, as I was raised in a middle-class suburb, in a family with a history of college attendance dating back to the 20s, and a complexion suited to a privilege I had yet to understand, I somehow squeezed, or more accurately, was squeezed, into my State University. It was so late of a

decision that I wasn't even able to select my first semester courses. Instead, I received them, like one of Plato's Universals, and did the best I could to instantiate them within the bounds of my 18-year-old frame.

The classes are of a little importance anymore. I can only just recall a whisper of their contents. Yet, they forever impacted me, shook me to my ignorant core, and threw me from the veil into the unmarked sunshine of the educated. Suddenly, I got it. Read something. Write something. Talk about something. Talk about it with your Professor. Talk about it with your peer. Walk and talk about it. Read something else. Write something else. Try to write better to express *that* idea. Repeat. Be inspired.

However cliché, however rote, something changed. College learning made sense to me and, from this, so too did learning as objective unto itself. I was awakened in a nearly spiritual fashion and separated from my public-school mentality entirely. From this process, I elevated college and university life to that of a golden calf, still looking disdainfully and in a rather pointedly downturned fashion at what was my still recent high school career.

I continued my studies and went on to receive a Bachelors in both English and Philosophy, never once considering what I'd do on the other side of college-life. Handed my degree and booted into the world, I worked a series of odd-jobs, all of which reminded me of the thoughtless procedures and processes of a time that I had almost thought was long gone.

It took luck and a favorite professor's email to land me a tutoring gig in a local high school. Although I was suspicious at first, only taking the job because it paid more than minimum wage, I soon I began a new awakening, similar to the first, this time centered on teaching. Working under some great public-school teachers, the likes of which I had never before seen, I learned to prod instead of point, to talk through instead of tell. It was exhilarating and I never looked back.

Now, entering my sixth teaching year, one-year student-teaching and four years leading my own classroom, I've never been more personally fulfilled, more pleased with my interaction with teaching and learning at large. Nonetheless, I am constantly troubled with the elevated conceptual position of the classroom teacher, particularly in neighborhoods and in schools like the one in which I teach: disenfranchised, underfunded, and represented by students of color. This capstone project is my attempt at a response to this, a minor righting of course if you will. It is my hope to both shine light on the community I teach and retract light from the teacher (myself) through an untraditional, memoir-bound narrative that takes an epistolary form, addressed to an unnamed second person who is intended to serve as a stand-in for all of my students. This memoir takes as its name *Reflections on the Eating of Bologna Sandwiches*.¹

I begin the white paper with a discussion of William James' *Talks to teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals*, David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* and Paulo Freire's *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* to illustrate several pedagogical ideals that I hold dear and to elucidate why I selected such a narrative form and what I hope for such a form to achieve. This section essentially serves the function of a minor literature review. I then move to discuss my general methodology and sources of memoir-bound inspiration, continuing the prior literature review with an explanation of how the memoir is designed and functions. Finally, I conclude with an evaluation of my work to date and where I intend to take the work moving forward.

¹ The memoir transcript can be found in Appendix 1.

CHAPTER 2: A Certain Blindness: Externalization of Interiority as Pedagogy and the Use of Second Person to Estrange

Externalization of Interiority as Pedagogy:

According to William James, human beings are unfortunately endowed with a certain blindness. This blindness, unlike the disability that partially shares its name, is not so much a physical ailment as it is an ingrained disease of judgment, causing each individual member of the human race to insensitively peer outside of his or her *impenetrable* "...phantasmagoric chamber" of a brain and think poorly (or perhaps even attempt to interfere with) another member's way of life, which he or she may deem to be lesser than his or her own due to its difference (James 118 & 130-31). To put it more distinctly, it would seem as if James deems this certain blindness to be the faulty process of externalizing one's interior condition (i.e. the joining of one's inner and outer worlds through perception, judgment, etc.) in an attempt to understand one's world and fellow human beings; a process that falls victim to the limitations of one's personal interior, for when externalized it acts as an "insensible point of view" (i.e. a perspective lacking universality) which is incapable of adequately assessing the interiority of another (James 130).

In an attempt to provide evidence for my claim that James's description of certain blindness is the type of process I have just mentioned, it will be useful to cite an example given in the text. Consider the hypothetical case of Jack and Jill, which serves as to paint the notion of love with a wide brush. As James states,

Every Jack sees in his own particular Jill charms and perfections to the enchantment of which we stolid onlookers are stone-cold. And which has the superior view of the absolute truth, he or we? Which has the more vital insight into the nature of Jill's existence, as a fact? Surely the latter; surely to Jack are the profounder truths revealed (James 130).

It is certainly difficult to offer up a precise definition of James's view of the "absolute truth," though it appears to be a notion that thwarts subjectivity, an eternal and universal concept held by all subjective participants operating within the confines of our shared world (James 130). As this version of the truth veers away from more basic instances of truth (such as $1+1=2$, for instance) and tends to focus on more sublime, or even spiritual, instances (i.e. what is shared by all rational human folk), James's clearest conception of truth comes at the very end of the text when he poetically refers to it as "...the nightingale of...eternal meaning" which sings "in all sorts of different men's hearts" (James 146).

Keeping this in mind, one may here wonder why James claims that Jack, in loving Jill, is more able to access the truth, or at least a "profounder" (i.e. more absolute) version of it, than the "stolid onlooker" who does not engage in the fancy of love (James 130). The "stolid onlooker," in making a value judgment as to Jill's potential romantic worth, has externalized his or her internal condition and, in doing so, has deemed "Jill's palpitating little life-throbs" to be unworthy of his or her "sympathetic interest" (James 30). Jack, on the other hand, makes use of the same process, though for different ends. Instead of externalizing his interior as a means of critically separating himself from an entity that is necessarily different, he selects to use this process of externalization as a way to "...struggle toward a union with [Jill's] inner life" (James 130). Since Jack's use of the process of certain blindness has, as its end, connection/understanding and not separation/critical assessment, James deems it to be a "superior" attempt at viewing, or conceiving of, that which is "absolute" or shared by all as a form of spiritual truth (James 130).

Though Jack's attempt may be "superior," he nevertheless participates in the process of blindness so as to be able to reach his goal (externalizing his internal world as a means of positively assessing Jill's internal condition) (James 130). Perhaps more importantly, Jack will

continue, time and again, to engage with said process so as to be able to sustain Jill's love; "inadequately" attempting to divine "her feelings," via said process of externalizing his interior condition, so as to be able to further his "union with her inner life" (James 130). Still, since Jack's attempt is a "serious" push to truly *understand* and *acknowledge* the interiority of another, even if it uses the externalization of his interior condition as a means to do so, while taking as an end the vaguely "pathetic" little system of facts and foibles that compose Jill's person, it is far "superior" to the usual track that this certain blindness allots (i.e. the critical separation of the "stolid observer"), which instead moves to blot the "eternal fact named Jill" out of the world as we know it (James 130-31). Thus, though the process that composes this certain blindness is inescapable, as we shall always externalize our interior conditions as a means of assessing our surroundings (perhaps having no other means to do so), James seems to think that, like Jack, we can at the very least steer our blindness toward an assessment of an 'other' that acknowledges, tolerates, and sympathizes with his or her interior state (i.e. his or her "inner secrets") (James 131). To do as such would be to actively laud the ideal of *acceptance*.

As there is clearly great reason to educate a student body on how best to externalize their interior states (i.e. limit their potential blindness), a teacher must make use of instructional activities that allow students to become more like Jack and less like the "stolid onlookers" (James 130). There appears to be no better instructional activity than the one that James employs throughout the text, that of presenting students with both prose and poetic-based narratives so as to allow them to bear witness to the internal conditions of many an individual, whether fictional or otherwise. Though this activity will not cure the students of this type of blindness (for this blindness is inextricable from the process that allows us as individuals to assess and access the internal lives of others and the external world surrounding) it will surely allow them to use their

private blindness as a means of being “more cautious in going over the dark places” (i.e. the places that lead toward “intolerances and cruelties, and positive reversals of the truth”) (James 131).

For instance, if a teacher were to present to an entirely Caucasian and upper-middle class grouping of students excerpts from a few narratives that spoke to the marginalization of people of color in their country (ex: Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, etc.), these students may gain an understanding of their privilege within the world and, in turn, a heightened awareness and sensitivity to the interiority of those who suffer from a lack of it (thereby hopefully beginning the process of thwarting any engrained prejudices or “intolerances” in the process) (James 131). As these students cannot truly gain admission to the interior states of those unlike them (or even those like them, for that matter) the ability to enter into a first person narrative situation, which is intended to symbolically represent a private and otherwise “impenetrable” state of subjective interiority, seems to be the closest alternative; a style of intimate connection (requiring student attention and interest, of course) that is quite similar to that which Jack (hypothetically) attempts with his lover, Jill (James 131).

This first-person narrative is often afforded to the teacher in the classroom memoir, thereby generating empathy on the part of the reader for the teacher while continuing the impenetrability of the student, making of the student a clear character, assessed from the outside in as opposed to the inside out. This is evidenced by classic examples of the genre: Frank McCourt’s *Teacher Man*, which is generally innocuous; or on the more unintentionally insidious end of the spectrum: Gregory Miche’s *Holla if You Hear Me* or LouAnne Johnson’s *My Posse Don’t Do Homework*, which, from title alone, divides the teacher and the student in such a way as to allow the reader to feel the “struggle” of a white educator in the “inner” city. Therefore, if we are to treat the archetypal reader as the student in the example above, the blindness of which James speaks is reinforced by way of these teacher narratives in a dangerous fashion, casting a sympathetic, though

not understanding or nuanced, perspective on the students described within them, i.e. allowing the reader to externalize their interiority by way of a teacher's assumptions, which in all likelihood are closer to their own than a student's.

This, I believe, is dangerous and is something that teacher-driven memoirs should attempt to combat, particularly those dedicated to a radical (progressive) pedagogy that seeks to promote a critical form of empathy and acceptance on the part of the student, instead of a more passive, and traditional, objective submission. To restate, if a teacher is to write a memoir, their memoir should attempt to mirror their pedagogical methods as a means of remaining intellectually consistent. If those methods are radical, insofar as they seek to reduce the teacher's role and elevate the student's, then the teacher's memoir should seek to do the same. In doing so, the teacher emphasizes the interiority of the student, which is often forgotten in such narratives, particularly if they are centered on the ever glorified "urban" student group.

Ideally, this creates a narrative that forces the reader to critically engage with both sides of the education memoir, teacher and student, as opposed to teacher *through* student (using the student as a mechanism to understand self-actualization on the part of the teacher). This is consistent with much of Paulo Freire's writings in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, insofar as it removes a teacher-writer's ability to operate through a "banking" pedagogical style, making "deposits" of knowledge into a reader's mind, particularly direct and uncritical deposits of information regarding disenfranchised student populations that allow the teacher to elevate their own status as *actualized* (24).

To best promote this critical engagement and reduce the sensation of presenting a "view from nowhere" (i.e. "the projection of local values as neutrally universal ones" (Freire 24)) through the continued acceptance of the traditional teacher-student memoir, I have elected to write my memoir in an epistolary form in which my students are compiled into a "you" that acts as both an

addressee and a protagonist, attempting to reduce the importance of my own perspective throughout the memoir. This is for two primary reasons. First, I believe that this form allows a reader to reduce their own *blindness* as concerns the teacher-student-school relationship and to further empathize with the addressed student compilation, thereby estranging themselves from their assumptions regarding disenfranchised students of color like those I teach.

Use of Second Person to Estrange:

The genesis of my use of an epistolary form in which the “you” addressed acts as an indicator of the students discussed throughout is primarily founded in an initial analytical reading of David Foster Wallace’s *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, from the perspective of audience theory. In this lesser known work, a series of men are interviewed by an anonymous Q, whose questions are intentionally removed from the text, leaving only the men’s answers. This allows the audience to play a “double role” by moving to both *identify* with the Q and see the Q from an *external* perspective. I will place my focus on *Interview #20*.² In this interview, we, as the audience, must engage in a process of *estrangement* to play our “double role.” This process of *estrangement* occurs when an explicit characteristic of the Q, given to the audience by way of the speaker’s dialogue and the Q’s reactions to it, is not something that the audience has found in their identifying with the Q. As the character of the Q becomes developed in the interview through the audience’s compiling of explicit characteristics, the audience is forced to reject all prior conceptions of and identifications with the Q, and instead embrace the Q as its own independently existing character before being forced, once more, to identify with the Q. What follows is an

² This interview is excerpted for reference in Appendix 2.

involved analysis of this phenomenon, intended to further solidify *why* I selected an untraditional form and structure for my memoir project.

The audience in Wallace's *Interviews* begins by implicitly and automatically filling in the Q. This is the first step in the identification process. When the audience enters into a first reading of the interview the Q is a hollow entity. To paint something as being an external thing is to give that thing a set of properties. Since the audience, at first, knows nothing about the Q, it is impossible for them to paint the Q as being an independently existing character capable of being seen from an external perspective. Therefore, in order to understand the interview, even as a literary form, the audience must begin to fill in the Q's implied dialogue. This is done, at first, by simply taking possession of the Q and attributing to it a set of reactions, or properties, that seem appropriate and familiar to the audience. For instance, after the audience is given the speaker's first lines, "And yet I did not fall in love with her until she had related the unbelievably horrifying incident in which she was brutally accosted and held captive and very nearly killed," the first Q appears (Wallace 287). At the arrival of the first Q the audience can do nothing but blindly fill it, making the Q react in a way that the audience, and not the Q, would react in that situation. This is because, at this point in the interview, the audience knows next to nothing about the Q.

As aforementioned, the Q is a hollow entity. It is a physical thing that the audience must, at first, leap over, and if that leap is a leap of faith, then the audience will be hopeful that soon the nature of the Q will be revealed to them in some way. This actually happens quite quickly. In the next section of dialogue, the speaker directly addresses another character within the world of the interview. He does this by qualifying his first bit of dialogue through the somewhat insecure statement of, "I'm aware of how it might sound, believe me. I can explain" (Wallace 287). Through the speaker's initial and direct address of the Q the process of estrangement commences. The audience now knows that the Q is not meant to be a hollow entity that they possess with their own

set of subjective, and familiar, reactions. Instead, the speaker's dialogue implies that the Q is an entity that exists independently from the audience. The speaker's worry about how his words may "sound" imply that another character is present, in the world of the interview, and that this character is capable of making independent value judgments about the character of the speaker and the integrity of his words.

The use of a second person epistolary form throughout my memoir seeks to accomplish a similar goal, if through slightly different means. The reader is seated initially in the position the "you" (a stand-in for the students), occupying that space and its characteristics, until estranged from it completely, a new, separate understanding can bloom. Unlike my role in the memoir, which acts as the "I" doing the writing of the address, the "you," in being initially more nebulous, will hopefully take on a more dominant position, elevating the students in the process and diminishing the speaker's (i.e. my own role) in the process.

For instance, in the first chapter, "What is Florida?", the reader is immediately estranged from the student "you" as the reader almost certainly has an impossible time of time imagining what it would be like to not know what Florida *is* (the title of this section is a bit of found student speech that allow for a conversation to happen around what people assume others may or may not know). This immediate *estrangement* automatically evidences the lack of hollowness that the student "you" possesses. Still, the "you" is unknown, being barely characterized beyond this once instance. Hence, the reader occupies a shaky position of estrangement and connection, only to be clarified over the course of the memoir in which the reader grows to identify with the "you" and estrange from the you time and again, ultimately resulting in the development of empathy on the part of the reader for the student.

In both the Wallace and my own work, the audience, or the reader, at this point, still does not have enough information about the Q, or the "you", as a character, to be able to attribute a set

of explicit properties to it. Therefore, it remains necessary, for the time being at least, to carry on with possessing the Q or the “you).

As the Wallace’s interview continues the character of the Q is developed further and the explicit set of characteristics and properties that make up the Q become more evident. This is because the scope of possibilities for the character type, and language, of the Q is narrowed by the words of the speaker, by the speaker’s reactions to the implied gestures of the Q, and by the physical Q itself-its form and position. For instance, the speaker ends his first description of the “Granola Cruncher, or post-Hippie, New Ager” with another qualifying phrase: “Whether or not you approve I think we can assume you understand” (Wallace 289). The audience can then ask the question “Why would Q not approve?” and then follow up with the question of “Why is the speaker worried enough about gaining the approval of the Q to qualify his description of the hippy girl in such a way?”

I employ a similar tactic throughout my memoir, often concluding chapters or interspersing sections with questions or reflections that force the audience/reader to infer some of the “you’s” properties and begin the process of estrangement. Although this process of estrangement serves to separate the audience from the “you”, and allows the “you” to stand alone as an external thing that is independent from the audience, it can never fully divide the audience from the “you. ” This is because once the “you” is externalized the audience must once more attempt to identify with the “you” but this time with the foreknowledge that the “you” is a character separate from them. Though this stage is an ambiguous one, if the audience comes to believe that they now have an understanding of the “you”, as an external character, and then attempts to once more identify with the “you”, internally, certain opinions and beliefs regarding the speaker’s motives (my own motives) with the “you” can be formed. It seems clear that these opinions and beliefs are bound to

be more critically empathetic as the reader once identified directly with the “you”; i.e., the “you” *was*, in some important sense, the reader.

Although I attempted to write several distinct versions of the memoir, initially mimicking Wallace’s style, I found little success with either removing myself completely from the narrative in the position of the Q or emboldening my perspective by occupying the space of the interviewee. Hence, the epistolary form: as close of a compromise between the traditional and student-elevated forms of teacher-memoir as I could strike. With this in mind, let’s discuss memoirs of influence to my project and the foundations of the actual memoir project itself.

CHAPTER 3: Memoir Review and Methodology

The Memoir:

To reiterate, *Reflections on the Eating of Bologna Sandwiches* is a memoir of my time teaching in the South Bronx, to date. It is written in an epistolary form, insofar as it is addressed to a “you” who represents all of my students, past and present. This narrative-form is theoretically, if not practically, rooted in the work of William James, Paulo Freire, and David Foster Wallace. What follows are an additional set of primary influences that acted on my memoir as more practical forces, helping to generate content and frame my larger task of shining as much light on the student as possible, thereby righting the course of the teacher-student memoir genre (in some very minor fashion) and promoting maximum empathy for said student on the part of the reader.

Memoir Review:

In attempting to move past Wallace’s interview form, though keeping the intimate play between identification and estrangement alive, I first turned to James Baldwin’s seminal “My Dungeon Shook” at the suggestion of my advisor, Professor Tougaw. What struck me about this piece is the rather delicate tone and simple diction, strange for a writer of such complexity and bravado as Baldwin. After several readings, I realized that this “reduction” in tone and diction was an attempt to better characterize Baldwin’s primary audience, i.e. his nephew who is clearly a younger man. I mimic much of Baldwin’s tone and diction throughout my own piece in an attempt to authenticate its form. I further this by including explicit explanations for anything I deem too complicated for a younger audience, both to act as an educative force and reinforce the teacher-student dynamic.

As Baldwin's letter is a published work, I believe, to some extent, that his second-person representation, i.e. the "you" addressed throughout the piece, is a ploy on the part of Baldwin, an attempt to do something similar to what I discussed in the estrangement section of this paper. The reader is both at once the "you" and increasingly estranged from the "you" due to specific character details throughout, thereby generating more of an empathetic and engaged response on their end as they have literally, to some extent, walked in James' shoes. This why when Baldwin ends his letter with the powerful, "You know, and I know, that the country is celebrating one hundred years of freedom one hundred years too soon. We cannot be free until they are free"—his words resonate beyond their direct addressee and into the hearts of hidden reader, who is also being addressed (10). My use of a similar form is in an attempt to meet a similar end.

Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* further solidified my ideas by continuing Baldwin's work, both in theme and structure, in a long-form style, incorporating more poetic and abstract prose. Adding to Baldwin, Coates deeply integrates his own person into his narrative. In talking about his upbringing Coates declares, "Before I could discover, before I could escape, I had to survive" before launching into a very moving tale of his younger years in Baltimore (23). Throughout my own memoir I have attempted to do the same, keeping the student, or the "you", as the primary character throughout, while integrating enough of my own personal life so as not to appear as a neutral bystander, issuing out a "view from nowhere" as previously discussed (Freire, 24).

Outside of these two major influences, *Holler If You Hear Me: The Education of a Teacher and His Students* by Gregory Michie and *My Posse Don't Do Homework* by LouAnne Johnson, two well-meaning but insidious teacher-hero memoirs, served as minor sources of inspiration, insofar as I took from them bits of casual and "streetwise" dialogue inspiration, cheeky chapter and memoir titles, and a general understanding of how to write a teacher-student classroom dynamic.

Primarily though, these texts motivated me to steady my theoretical track and ensure that I was doing as much as I possibly could to elevate my disenfranchised students over my own pedagogical struggles, so as to subvert the content of these traditional teacher-student memoirs. For instance, in reference to his time teaching in an “urban” setting Michie states, “I was fighting for survival” (6). This is the exact sort of unintentionally blind and nearly masturbatory (on the level of racial and socioeconomic dynamics) language that populates much of the genre, as if the true struggle was in the pursuit of teacher control and mastery and not student education and success.

Finally, from Frank McCourt’s *Teacher Man* I take the following sentiment: “... teachers come, teachers go, all kinds, old, young, tough, and kind” and try to follow it to its logical conclusion, to the best of my ability, further emphasizing the importance of the student, while redefining the teacher’s role as a facilitator of such importance (12).

Methodology:

Reflections on the Eating of Bologna Sandwiches is set entirely in the small, public, South Bronx high school in which I have taught for the past four years. I decided early on, after experimenting with a purely fictional set of short stories that expressed similar themes, to restrict myself to the genre of memoir, holding to the truth to the best of my memory’s ability, which is to say firmly but lacking certainty of fact. My memory was aided by a collection of informal journals to which I consistently added throughout these years, detailing certain exemplary moments in a vivid, extemporaneous, and fragmented style. In re-reading these entries I noted a certain ineffable quality or aliveness that I wanted to sustain within the formal piece. Consequently, I decided to structure the memoir as a series of interlocking vignettes, with an interchangeable, nearly random order, blurring the lines between years, circumstances, and students (i.e. the ever-present “you”) in

an intentional way, trying to formally conceive of that same alive quality that I think best gets at the themes I discuss throughout.

These themes are all centered on reclaiming the teacher-memoir for the student, emphasizing the student's general character throughout by, to once again restate, allowing the reader to initially engage with said student as a shared "you" before estranging themselves from the "you" over time, attributing to the "you" its own distinct set of properties and characteristics. As I also weigh heavy in the narrative as the speaker, though in a decidedly less complex way for the reader, it is my belief that this abovementioned process of estrangement will rid readers of that certain blindness that often overlooks students as pawns to valorize teachers (in the memoir genre).

More specifically, these themes address several questions that I found motivating throughout the course of writing this memoir. In fact, when coupled with my theoretical and practical influences, these questions also served to initiate the writing process itself. I first wondered, *what is the nature of an economically diverse community of "middle-class" public employees and "low-income," historically disenfranchised, students and their guardians?* As my school community, and many similar school communities, are structured in almost an economically binary fashion (the middle-class teacher and the disenfranchised student population), I wished to explore what such a binary can spawn in terms of fruitful interactions, exchanges, and/or moments of growth and exploration—for both parties. Chapter such as "What is Florida?," "It's so far" or "The Good, the Bad, and The Ugly," and "Projections" attempt to address this question, albeit not as directly as expressionistically.

I also wished to explore whether or not the teacher narrative *can function as a means of increasing empathy across the teacher/student line*. I dedicated the formatting of my memoir to such an exploration, but also certain chapters approach this point of inquiry from a distinctive narrative position. Chapters such as "I Hate It Here," "An Integer is a Negative or Positive

Number,” “It’s Brittany, B*tch,” “It’s Lit,” “The Rona,” and “Free Write Feels” all work as points of estrangement for the reader, disallowing them from occupying the space of the “you” and in turn (hopefully) shattering—to the degree that such a thing is possible—the innate disability of assumption in regard to one’s characterizing of another.

Additionally, chapters such as “Some Asian Girl,” “The Opposition” or “The Opps,” “Yo, Mister. You going to the store?,” and “Rob and then Nina and then Adam and then maybe Dan or All the Friends I’ve Made” address the question of *how the teacher-narrative can lend itself to the project of further democratizing public education* insofar as they embrace cultural differences between teachers and students, uplift relationships formed within the confines of a school environment, and issue out an empathetic respect to all parties involved in the daily interactions and experiences of a school. In doing so, it is my hope that these chapters, in a roundabout and not expository fashion, successfully argue for Paulo Freire’s idea that “...there is no such thing as a *neutral* educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, *or* it becomes ‘the practice of freedom,’ the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (34).

Of course, I acknowledge that many of these chapters serve intersectional purposes and take on a life of their own when read in concert with that which surrounds them. As John Dewey, father of modern educational philosophy, claims in his book *Democracy and Education*, “our mechanical, industrialized civilization is concerned with averages, with percents. The mental habit which reflects this social scene subordinates education and social arrangements based on averaged gross inferiority and superiorities” (198). Why make a memoir, driven by its poetic expression, equally as mechanical or systematic? For better or worse, I have let the chapters, their order, and the

general progression of the project stand as a swirling mechanism to hopefully further the guiding themes, theoretical propositions, and general beliefs that I have argued for and explained at length throughout this paper.

CHAPTER 4: Evaluation, Continuation, and Conclusion

Evaluation and Continuation:

In these strange and trying times I stand as unsure as ever of my general project, its importance (if any), and its standing in my own eyes. When I began writing this memoir in December of 2019, it would have been impossible for me to conceive of the pandemic-related tumult that would follow in the impending months. Luckily, I continue to be positioned in a seat of relative comfort. I am gainfully and safely (for now) employed as a teacher. I can pay my rent and fulfill my basic necessities without hardship or fear of lack. The same cannot be said of my students or my city, New York, at large. This shrinks the importance of my project and its general intentions to a twinkle in the eye of its original conception. In other words, it reads as unsettlingly tone-deaf, having only one brief chapter, “The Rona,” dedicated to what is happening *now*. In some ways all of my hard work feels like bologna, if you’ll allow for such low-hanging fruit.

Perhaps if I were more abled, readier, more primed to capture the *now*, I would have written a more journalistic piece. Thinking as I do that memoir is primarily the work of transcribing memory, it seemed difficult to include the active present in a reflective way that fit with the general tenor of my developing piece.

Therefore, when continuing this work, which I plan to do, expanding it, ideally, to book length, I imagine that the primary text will center around what is currently happening, pushing to expand “The Rona” chapter into something more involved.

Still, I remain proud of what I created and believe that it accomplishes what I originally set out to do. When I read through the piece I feel my students come to life and myself fade away. I see the depth and the beauty of the teaching and learning experience; the richness and nuance of what it means to come to school every day, whether by choice or by government mandate.

Like a time-capsule, buried deep within the earth, this memoir, in its current iteration, stands as an echo of what once was and an intimation of what can be moving forward. It laughs, cries, celebrates, sings, dances, and slinks through the world in a fleshy living form. It is the perfect expression of my MALS concentration, Individualized Studies with a focus on Urban Education, insofar as I believe it individualizes the Urban Education experience by adding something new to said experience's cannon. I can only hope that whatever limited reader base engages with it feels similarly.

Conclusion:

I often thought of Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* while working on this project. It is a classic pedagogical tale, in some ways, for it is the tale of coming to the light; coming to a new form of distinct understanding and living there, now newly enlightened. An individual who is initially chained to a wall and forced to look at shadows escapes into the world, only to be shocked by the reality of it all. Slowly though, coming to their own, this individual realizes the truth of all things and seeks to return to the cave, to tell their old companions of what they now know.

This attempt to educate is not well met. The old companions, prisoners if you will, don't like what the enlightened one has to say. In fact, they threaten him, comforted by what they *know* instead of what they *could*. In summary, the newly enlightened is left to either live alone or seek a way to better convince his former, ignorant, companions of the light of the world.

In many ways, this is the driving thematic force behind most teacher memoirs. The teacher, an enlightened, if initially bumbling and not well met, individual, is forced to figure out how to educate a difficult and unwilling population. This, to put it simply, is the glorification of the teacher at the expense of the student and is, to put it simply once again, *bologna*.

Now, as much as I like bologna, being the palatable-flat-hotdog-of-lunchmeats, it cannot sustain me nor the teacher memoir genre any longer. *Reflections on the Eating of Bologna Sandwiches* is a response to this, a making of the student a hero by placing them within a new narrative dynamic, one that doesn't portray them as being cave-bound or initially ignorant.

Yet, there is still bologna to be had and to be consumed if one is to be called "educated." The cave remains as a structural constraint within the imagination of the entire education system. This memoir does not address that. It addresses smaller things. Like whether or not we should eat and whose story is it, after all?

CHAPTER 5: Capstone Project

Reflections on the Eating of Bologna Sandwiches: A Memoir
by Ben Raphael
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“What is Florida?”

It’s been about four years, as long as I was in high school, when you walk up to me at the close of one early September afternoon class and ask, “What is Florida?” I laugh, thinking you’re joking but you’re really not, more perplexed than anything.

“Florida?” I repeat and you nod your head.

It’s true, the South Bronx is about 1,000 miles away from Florida’s closest border and I see your question as something almost from another time. Like a depression-era child working in a map factory, having never left home.

“Florida is a state directly south of here. As far south as you can go while still being in the US.”

You nod your head again.

No one hears this exchange and then the bell rings. The class exits. It’s taken me until that moment to stop assuming you know things, like what Florida is, or what goes on outside this place.

“Some Asian Girl”

You call a recent immigrant from China “some Asian girl” and then you wonder aloud whether or not the Chinese store chicken and rice is really made with subway rats like you’ve heard someone say before, maybe your uncle.

The “African” girl, also newly arrived, is “Fatima” even though her name is Mariama. Two years later, after she has many friends, you still call her this.

Xavier, a very popular and well-adjusted junior, is Chino because he is both Puerto Rican and Filipino, but looks more Filipino than Puerto Rican. His nickname is so integrated into our community that even the principal calls him Chino. We’ve all forgotten what it is even in reference to.

Every black kid with a lighter complexion becomes a light-skinned, which somehow implies that they are “boujee,” a holdover from Reconstruction, remember? Drake does.

And she has “good hair” and you have “bad hair” and why are all those little white girls suddenly wearing Adidas like they know something over there, downtown.

And you don’t know what I am because there’s olive under my skin and my last name sounds like your friend’s first. Raphael. A Jewish name. A name made on Ellis Island, where the European immigrants of the 1900s passed through and then into New York. A name along with an identity.

And I’m always disappointing you with my looks and my name, always feeling strange about what I am and what I’m not.

Maybe you understand?

“I Hate It Here”

Sometime around year four I hear you say “I hate it here” in a way that is clearly lined with humor but also serious, like talking about the extinction of penguins, which is only really funny because they can’t fly.

You start to repeat it. Every time you get a bad grade, whenever some teacher tells you off, some school safety agent presses you for being late again. I talk to you about it when I find the chance.

I’m the Dean this year, which means that on top of my teaching duties I have to keep track of the entire 10th grade. I do a lot of calling parents, scanning spreadsheets for attendance data, informal counseling, that sort of thing. Although I like the job enough, and feel touched by the additional responsibility provided to me, I have, as of late, been thrust into the politics of our school. In simpler terms, I’m starting to see how the sausage is made, which is an idiom that loosely translates to I’m starting to understand how things around here work. An idiom is just a common expression or phrase, like saying “taking a look under the hood” and not even having a car.

Today has been especially filled with sausage. I met with your social workers, whose names you know well, and discussed how to improve your academic standing. Can you believe you’ve dropped 20 percentage points in regard to your credit accumulation since last marking period? That’s no bueno.

Anyway, they’ve been struggling to find a place in our school community, even if you love them. You see, we want them to help you out, to talk about your relationship problems and sympathize with you over difficult home situations. And in an ideal world you’d have as many

hours as you need to debrief, discuss, reflect, and be your best self; but we remain a school, in a difficult area at that, and you need to pass the Regents or you're screwed.

This is what we shoulder each day and try to balance. It's no small task and it's also not charity. We teachers and social workers go home to our apartments and middle class lives. Trust me, NYC is no easy place to live. We're not rich, just okay. Which is where we'd like you to be: okay. I know it's hard to believe, but being okay is glamorous in its own right.

And being okay doesn't mean that sometimes I also don't wonder aloud if "I hate it here too."

“The Opposition” or “The Opps”

You spend a day in the gym talking shit. Talking about how you can't go downtown via train because if the “opps” catch you it's on and definitely going live, full stream, and no you won't be having any of that.

This is complicated for me to understand because you won't really explain it, just talk more about this beef or that fight and how when those subway doors close you are “getting it on, no cap.” And it's true, or at least it was for me when I was your age. Fists rarely lie.

Yet unlike you I fought to prove some uncomplicated, strange idea of manhood—whereas you fight out of a sense of self-preservation. The streets aren't safe for you and you are always turning back, turning around, spinning your head to watch over your shoulder. And you have seen guns and sometimes carry knives and shove screwdrivers into your waistbands. There is nothing glamorous about it up close and I think you would laugh if you knew how many people, so far from you, believe it to be.

I'd be interested for you to meet a cousin of mine, a bright kid, recently graduated from NYU without student debt. He has taken your words, your “opps,” your “smoke,” your “fancy,” your “drip,” your “beef,” and uses them in his clean interpretations of your rap music. They are so clean, so tailored, even though they rest behind the explicit “E.”

He sleeps peacefully in a New Jersey suburb and has two very friendly, very generous doctors for parents. He mimics your watching, your fear. Speaks about “pulling up” and “standing up to die for his people.” I don't think he's to blame and love him very much. In fact, I think you would too. He looks cool. And so do you. Just for different reasons.

Hell, I spend most days blasting Fivio Foreign and 22gz right before a change of bell rings and I have no justification for that beyond the aesthetic, which is a word that can mean many

things, but in this context most likely means that I believe the music to be beautiful regardless of its message and, sometimes, even with it.

And so do you. Just for different reasons.

“It’s so far” or “The Good, the Bad, and The Ugly”

It’s not and still you won’t move. Another 1st period, another early morning conflict. I’ve barely had my first of three a.m. cups of coffee and here we are again, in a Mexican standoff, which is, without a doubt, a racist term, but acknowledges an interesting trope, or theme, that hopefully, one day, will be better named. Really, it’s just a three-way standoff, usually with pistols and sombreros and cowboy hats and American Imperialism, which is just a puffed-up way of saying our country took what it didn’t deserve or, maybe better put, own. Today it’s just you and me and that little voice in my head that tells me to turn around already and get back to teaching the class.

“It’s not that far,” I say because it’s really not. It’s actually right in front of you, the day’s worksheet that is, but you won’t stand up to get it and continue to eat your breakfast, chewing slowly as the whole class unravels around your core, like a spool of thread tumbling down a low set of stairs.

It’s so close, really, that you could reach across your desk and grab it with just a bit of effort. And your friends are even rooting you on or is it begging you please to just get it already, to just end that strange space we are all in again, us children and adult, us people who, in the second month of the year, remain October strangers.

The noise is deafening. The “GET IT,” “TAKE IT,” “WHAT ARE YOU DOING,” “HURRY UP ALREADY.” My “please take your paper,” “your grade will suffer,” “what are you thinking,” and so on.

So you start to cry. Well you start to shake your leg up and down, up and down, and then you start to cry. Slow, big, tears.

Then there is the silence, like after someone falls from a great height. Your face is red and somehow puffy.

Later, after you have been removed from class, and after the social worker has informed me of your recent homelessness, I will feel mostly ugly, mostly bad, and not good at all.

“An Integer is a Negative or Positive Number”

You throw up gang signs and let me know a police officer in a Santa hat assaulted you last Christmas. But when your math teacher asks what is an integer, you respond.

It's Brittany, B*tch

You always want what you don't have, until you have it and then you want the opposite again. And then again. Ad infinitum, which is a fancy way of saying infinity. No matter.

Today, we teachers, and a few of your Principals at that, tried to band together and film a video in an effort to get a boardroom of important Department of Ed folks to okay an expansion of our school. I have to admit, I treated it like a joke at first. It may be hard for you to *believe*, but I poke jokes constantly, as old habits die hard, and *believe* me when I tell you, I really wasn't a great high school student. Actually, I was closer to a bad one—sleeping, skipping class, smoking *GASP*...though perhaps that is too much to share.

Actually, that's up for debate. Teachers are in constant debate about what amounts to too much sharing and what amounts to too little. Remember, for instance, your rather strange algebra teacher. She had an indistinct Eastern-European accent and always wore a Brittany Spears style headset microphone so that she could teach over you instead of with you? She elected to share nothing. Not where she was from, nor why she decided to wear that microphone. I think, in part, that that's why she couldn't cut it with you. Even I was always wondering: what's the story behind that?

“Yo, Mister. You going to the store?”

You always know when I am. It’s like you can sense my coat slipping on before I even decide to leave. And usually I just have a minute, just a second, and say no. Though every once in a while, you get me in your brazen spotlight, and poof I’m dust. So again, I’m off to get a:

- Chopped cheese, LT, no onion, mayo, ketchup
- Flaming Hots, cranberry juice
- Sprite and egg/cheese/bacon, no funny shit
- Bacon and cream cheese on a plain bagel from the deli down the street
- Any dollar candy
- Turkey, pepperjack, light mayo, SP, roll, actually hero
- Whatever you’re getting get two
- Maybe a cheeseburger, but if they don’t got it, a pack of mini muffins, blueberry

It’s always hard to remember, so I write it down, in a notebook, and not my phone, like the English teacher I am. I’ve thought of compiling some of the best items you’ve asked for into a bit of a found poem, which is something you’d find funny because it’s a form of poetic expression that takes as its focus the language of others, like hip-hop did instrumental music. Like if you were to say, “a bag of chips, juice” then that’s a poem. I think I’d call it, “It’s not BO-dega. It’s bodega.”

“It’s Lit”

Over the years you’ve had plenty of reasons to celebrate, with or without me. I’d like to remind you of a few of them here, so when times get hard, which they do for everyone, you’ll have something to turn to, a little trinket in the night to hold close.

...

I remember when “Bodak Yellow” came out, late June of 2017. I went to Europe that summer, before the coronavirus scare, back when people were afraid of flying for good classic reasons, like falling to their death. Luckily, I didn’t fall and landed back in NYC, late August, to the sharp sounds of Ms. Cardi’s voice, knocking around every passing car and window and speaker like loose change in a jar.

It seemed like you were dancing, always, then. Sometimes in the classroom to my chagrin, which is a way of saying that I was embarrassed and felt I should have participated, or really wanted to at least, but was, you know, teaching.

I’d turn a corner and, suddenly, as if from out of some wall like a ghost, you’d be there, huddled together and swaying side to side. Complex movements of the arms and legs, flailing up and down and to the side, luxuriously, as if silk lengths of rope.

Maybe it was silly of me to be impressed, or white of me, though I remain so. So impressed, in fact, that this chapter alone could teach you about figurative language: metaphor, simile, exaggeration. I often find metaphor the hardest to use and exaggeration the easiest, though maybe that’s just an exaggeration of my skills. Being a teacher is like being a rock among birds that has to pretend to be a bird too just because a real bird picked it up in its talons. But that doesn’t mean it can fly really, just that it can attach itself to a thing that can, like you, with your dancing.

So, to introduce another maybe, and maybe use a metaphor, being a teacher is being a rock among birds. That I'm okay with, as long as I'm not too heavy.

This is all beside the point really. I tend to ramble and tell jokes and try to be as silly as I can with you because so often, too often, everyone is serious. This is all fine and good. You deserve serious professionals working on your side and, if you'll let me be real with you, a lot of us are and some of us aren't. I like to think of myself as being serious about my job, which is your education, and not so serious about how I do it, because where is the fun in that?

For example, do you remember that prime joke I told about Scooby Doo's haircut: What does he wear after he gets one? A Scooby Dooby Doo Rag.

I'll take a bow for that one.

Oooh, or what about that time where we had a color war in the park. It was like jazz music was playing in the background as we assembled to fire off puffs of color into our faces and torsos in an imitation of some long forgotten clown war. The Clown War of 2018. A serious affair.

Or what about when you went around to each classroom just to holler: "I'm back!" and we all were so happy that you were, even though you'd never went anywhere in the first place.

Or when you got your citizenship!

Or when we played in that student staff basketball game and you-know-who tripped over his untied shoe lace and fell, face first, and we all tried not to laugh and laughed anyway without stopping, a cacophonous, meaning loud and all over the place, sound, lifting us out of the gym and into some special rotating heaven, encircled in the love we felt for one another, as a community.

Or when we cried through tears because you were accepted and damn right we'd figure out a way for you to afford it!

Or when, well you get the idea.

No matter how hard things get, and things will get hard, weird, odd, or just plain awful, we have these memories and gosh it really doesn't take so long to get the ball rolling with them, to tune them up for takeoff and landing, to play them over on loop like a video bite pulled from the gram.

Mostly, if you'll let me be really real, the good ones don't even take someone like me to make happen. They are all you. And, if that's the case, then you really don't have to remember them at all. Instead, you can get out there and make them, get out there and keep experiencing joy.

Projections

I think life is a bit like a projector screen. You watch as things are manipulated before you. I remember it, from my own time as a student, as comforting, a sensation of submissiveness, which is a sensation that requires nothing from you, in this case, other than attention, and quietude, which I know you've never heard of before, but come on. We went over words in context.

There is a Brazilian thinker, by the name of Paolo Freire (pronunciation, I believe, is unimportant), who says this action is similar to banking, a metaphor of sorts. He believes that the unthoughtful teacher, the traditional teacher, makes "deposits" into a student's mind, "deposits of knowledge," which really doesn't sound like too bad of a thing on its face. Yet, when you think about it, this turns out a pretty uneven relationship between student and teacher. I mean, wouldn't you rather make the deposit than be the bank? Wouldn't anyone? It's not the bank's money after all.

This idea is tough to show you, or maybe just tough to show you well. You like to say that teachers who try a more democratic, or equal, style of teaching "can't teach." Usually, you're right because most have been teaching for what, 1 or 2 years and think that building a collaborative classroom doesn't take any work, that it's what people, like you, crave. And I get it, but I get you too. When I was in high school, I loved the classrooms in which I could sit back, half close my eyes, and sit dead as a teacher droned on. I, like you, and every other teenager, barely got enough sleep. Such an experience was a nice reprieve or break.

Still, when it's done well, this style of teaching is pretty awesome and now that I spend much of my day bouncing in and out of other teacher's classrooms, I know that it exists, if not on a daily basis, then at least sometimes.

Imagine: the hands under the projector screen, moving, and writing, and modeling, are your own. You walk through your classroom like a museum's gallery. You listen to no one. And you learn, maybe nothing as in-depth as how to rotate a triangle, more like how to speak with others and solve problems with those who are your own age; take back what's yours to begin with, your bank statement.

The reason why I say that life is like a projector screen, and relax I know I'm about to sound old here, is that with all this tech, just floating around, these iPhones and laptops and smart TVs, it's so easy to just watch life happen, to sink into a faraway underground place like that one Netflix show where that kid has that thing crawl into him and it's set in 1980 or some date close to that and, you know what, that's actually not a good example because all those kids get together, they group up, and they get it done, whether supernatural or regular. And that's just cool. Right?

When I was that age it took like, sheesh, an hour to even decide what movie my friends and I wanted to watch. And we didn't even have streaming. We literally just couldn't decide, walking around the movie store, grabbing snacks, acting the fool. Maybe that's okay too, sometimes, even in school. Acting the fool. Playing around.

Did I tell you I was arrested at your age? Have I told you what happened? How it went down? What I learned from it?

Now that would be a tricky deposit to make.

“The Rona”

Whenever someone coughs they have “the Rona” because of course they do, it’s 2020 and Spring is going to shit, if you’ll excuse my French, which is an idiom the origin of which I have no idea, though I bet it is France.

For now, it is 2 weeks before everything will be locked down and things are as they normally are. That last sentence is pretty interesting as it gets at both the future, the past, and the present. The future tense lets us know that everything “will be” locked down, whereas the “things as they are” is present, not to us, because we’re not there anymore, but in the world of the sentence, because *fun*, grammar. The past is implied from this as, you know, it’s not really happening now. Sorry, trying to squeeze in some remote learning whenever I get the chance.

Speaking of remote learning or distance education or whatever it’s being called these days, what do you think about it? It sure would be nice to ask you that, to hear your voice again, even in complaint. Yes, we have our daily Google Meet lessons, but that doesn’t replace the vinyl experience of our now Mp3 existence.

Or does it? We are getting used to things that once felt impossible, a good lesson for life in general. From the comfort of my home, I can suddenly “teach” you “all” and I think I’m actually getting pretty good at it. It’s a bit exciting, learning new things, feeling fresh again after these first few years.

Still, my excitement is a rare luxury in these times. I’ve more money than ever before, not commuting, going out to eat, or buying really much of anything at all outside of groceries. And it’s just me and my wife-to-be in our relatively enormous, by NYC standards, two-bedroom apartment. We have a washer and dryer and a dishwasher and a fully-stocked fridge and a car and the space and the comfort and the family and the friends and the support system to ride out a pandemic.

And some of you do too, but most, no. It pains me to think of you, squeezed into small apartments, overcome by those you love. I do not think I would have been able to remain sane if this had occurred when I was your age. My parents and I were never on the best of terms and I imagine this sort of extended closeness would only intensify those sentiments. Particularly if we were hungry and they were unemployed and my English teacher was up my ass, calling me at 4 in the afternoon.

This is all to say that my worries are of little importance, a preface, or introduction, if you will, to what comes next.

What will come next? I struggle to imagine and maybe so do you.

I can't imagine returning to a normal that isn't a "new normal," which is to say something that won't be normal at all, like airports after 9/11.

Free Write Feels

Sometimes I can't think of anything at all to do that feels productive, so I try to start writing and get a little rhythm going, mostly to make it seem like I'm doing something. I like this exercise and think it clears the mind, even if it doesn't necessarily lead to the world's greatest writing. That's why I assigned it to you, on a weekly basis, after I realized that getting started with writing was what you struggled with most.

There is this strange thing that all people, not just you, do when they gear up to write something down, an act that feels way more permanent than it actually is. Don't get me wrong, the pen is mighty, even mightier than the sword perhaps, but old adages, or sayings, aren't really always true, and I think it would do us all some good to think of our pens as something other than weapons, right? These days are already so violent and I can never tell if they always have been and I've only just come awake, or if this period of time is really different and unique, which I doubt.

Anyway, you catch my drift right? Writing is too messy to be mighty all the time and that's for the best.

This gets me thinking of painting, which I only just started. I've been watching a great deal of YouTube tutorials on how to paint portraits and can't believe that most, even the photorealistic ones, almost always start out as a flat blob of color and somehow, through time and effort, become true, nearly photographic, faces. It's incredible.

A mighty thing can generate or create free of other forces and a pen just can't do that. Even if it could, who cares? Not me.

You see, we're all just very plain, not very mighty at all, and as special as we may feel, regular is more like it. And regular is great. The biggest lie of all is that greatness is what we should be striving for. Regularity more like it.

For the sake of the word we need more regular thinkers who are less of afraid of what they have to say when it is written down, the longer and the messier the better. Otherwise machine think takes over and we will all become slaves to our little screens and designated character counts and...

This is why I like to free write through my feels. Somewhere in this mess there is a little essay if I wanted it bad enough. It would be about society, I think. It wouldn't be that hard to write either. Bet.

Rob and then Nina and then Adam and then maybe Dan or All the Friends I've Made

Who are, excuse me, to you, and in order: Mr. Sorensen, Ms. Ortiz, Mr. Sawamura, and Mr. Thompson. There are others as well, but these are the ones who I have made memories with, both in and out of the building—which is of course our school.

Some, like Kenny, who is always out with a “bad back,” you know by first name. There is a hierarchy or pecking order or list of who is more important or less important and although this one is specific to our school, insofar as those lower down are first name people, whereas those higher up are not, you can find a similar list anywhere. For example, you probably have one at home. That's why you call your mom “mom” and not Mona or whatever her first name is.

Anyway, let's start with Sorensen, who is not always your favorite teacher, but who walks throughout the halls as a beacon of caring light and you know it, even if you can't always admit it. I don't know if he would like me talking about him, as he is a very private man, somber in the way of people who are usually much older, and tall with a thin face and tamed hawkish features and the sense of a secret trailing him at all times. Adults think he is cool and composed.

There is this story he tells about his time before teaching, back when he was a city social worker, adrift in the street, pacing back and forth, uptown to the east, searching for homeless people, trying to talk them into a bowl of hot soup and a bed. At that time, people called that neighborhood the “Terrordome,” which is a phrase of uncertain origin, though most give credit to the rap group Public Enemy, and means hell on earth, which it was and continues to be.

One day, planes flew into the Twin Towers and the world stopped. Thousands of people dead. Mourning in the streets. Emergency workers and first responders and all the restaurants shutdown and no one went to work or left their house. Students rushed home from school. I'm sure you can imagine.

Still, the homeless and the addicts, left roaming the streets of the “Terrordome” in search of food, in search of clean needles, in search of a city social worker, stayed put. They had nowhere to go. Yet, no one showed up to work to help. Except, that is, for Sorensen. This is what we call a character-defining story. It doesn’t even matter that he was the one to tell it.

Next up is Ortiz, who is perhaps your most vocal teacher and is more loved than hated, though certainly hated by some. I think polarizing is a good word to describe her because it means that people only hold one of two extreme opinions and in this case those happen to be love and hate. It helps if you imagine love as the North Pole and hate as the South. That’s a long way to travel.

Ortiz was born in NYC, the daughter of Dominican parents. Due to strange circumstances, she found herself living upstate, in a wealthy Westchester neighborhood, with a white firefighting step-dad and as I’m sure you can imagine, this changed things. It’s also what’s made her such a wonderful teacher for you. She gets it, she’s kept it, but she is as aware of life inside your fishbowl as outside of it. This is not to say that your life is so small that it could only occupy the space of a fishbowl. Instead, it’s to say that almost everyone who doesn’t have the opportunity to access more than their local community lives within a fishbowl; another metaphor. I was in it too. It takes a while to get out and see the world and Ortiz helps you to do so, at least I think so. I could be wrong and often have been wrong, so who really knows.

If anyone does it’s Mr. Sawamura, your ever-organized, nearly jolly, and yet somehow grave, History teacher. Grave means serious and you know what I mean. Although his classroom is certainly the most colorful, you get down to business there and find a certain type of success that is rare within other classroom contexts. The ability to manipulate facts is such a good feeling because everyone can do it, unlike a math equation or a sentence. We only just became friends this year, so I really don’t know much about him, just that sometimes I get jealous and think: “wow, that’s the

sort of teacher I'd like to be," particularly when I am not as prepared as I'd like, which happens more than I'd like to admit. He deserves the Mr. in front of his name.

Finally, there is Thompson, one of our proud leaders and a hyper-dedicated professional. He has spent his entire 15-year career in our building, which means he has seen it through several school changes before taking the role of Assistant Principal within our current community. He is heavily tattooed and before I taught here I honestly didn't know that you could look like that and get a job. As soon as I figured out you could I jumped on the bandwagon, which means that I signed up for something that was already popular to begin with.

Thompson's defining characteristic is his intelligence and learnedness. Basically, he knows a lot, and shows it by composing a daily email to everyone on staff, full of jokes and historical references and fun little tidbits. It started off as annoying, but now exists in this special place of "Things That Only Happen At Hero."

I'm sure the above is really not that interesting to you. When I was your age, I couldn't care less about my teachers' personal lives, unless there was something gossipy going around. That could just have been me though.

I share the above with you because I want you to know what it looks and feels like when you work alongside people you respect, in a job that rewards you with more than its purpose, giving you friendships that last a (I can't believe I'm about to say this) lifetime.

I share the above with you because I want you to have this too; a career. So much of what is required to reach this level is nonsense. So much of high school is nonsense. Once you get to where you are going everyone, including the Principal of our school, can agree on that. Still, to get there you have to go through it. It's a shared exercise in pushing through, in persisting, in letting the fat rise to the top and skimming it off.

I made my own problems when I was young. Some of you do the same. Some of you have problems that are worthy of news. Some of you are news. Most of you know that most of everything a kid is asked to do is bologna. Most of you don't like bologna. Some of you will eat it anyway. All of you should, if only to be more able to eventually rid yourself of it.

Appendix: Excerpt of Interview #20 (Brief Interviews with Hideous Men by David Foster Wallace):

Note: Pages 381-382, taken entirely for structure, not thematic content

“B.I. #20 12-96

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‘And yet I did not fall in love with her until she had related the story of the unbelievably horrifying incident in which she was brutally accosted and held captive and very nearly killed.’

Q.

‘Let me explain. I’m aware of how it might sound, believe me. I can explain. In bed together, in response to some sort of prompt or association, she related an anecdote about hitchhiking and once being picked up by what turned out to be a psychotic serial sex offender who then drove her to a secluded area and raped her and would almost surely have murdered her had she not been able to think effectively on her feet under enormous fear and stress. Irregardless of whatever I might have thought of the quality and substance of the thinking that enabled her to induce him to let her live.’

Q.

‘Neither would I. Who would now, in an era when every—when psychotic serial killers have their own trading cards? I’m concerned in today’s climate to steer clear of any suggestion of anyone quote asking for it, let’s not even go there, but rest assured that it gives[...].’

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