

# We Were Taught to Colonize with Literature: A Pedagogical Memoir

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Maybe you can relate to my obsession with the humanities; the humanities are miracles, after all. They are torrents and ruptures of voice that remind us of the mysterious in the organized world. Humanities are an eye of the deity: in our close gaze of them, we are validated in our humanness and simultaneously offered an escape, no matter how ephemeral. Thich Nhat Hahn (2013) points to this very arrangement in his question, *Isn't poetry already spirituality, and spirituality already poetry?* His is not a particularly unique musing about the connection between form, reception, and mystery. Paul Klee (1969), renowned master of color theory, reflected on humankind's affinity for this mysterious escape in a lecture delivered for his Bauhaus students. "Creative power", he held, "is ineffable. It remains ultimately mysterious. And every mystery affects us deeply" (p. 4).

I am a harvester of the humanities. I want to cull from art the very stuff that might save us from one another and save me from myself. I depend on them for pleasure, for time travel, for shared language, for ethics of goodness and justice, for understanding what Arendt (1958) called the "conditions of human existence" (p. 34). To say that I devour texts, is a too-polite understatement. I am a gourmandizing fiend. I slurp up novels, swallow paintings whole, feast on memoirs. I get and spend all my calories this way.

My enduring devotion to the humanities delivered me into the work of teaching high school English, where I promptly learned ways to ruin them. Like many others, I was confronted with, and have been complicit in, an escalation in 'accountability' culture. This manifested as an overemphasis on discrete competencies, behavior compliance, and a shared fixation on testing scores. From the very first days in my career as English teacher, I was challenged by schooling rituals and expectations that I found to be antipodal to the humanities. Though my personal life felt like a banquet of art, certain scenes from my early professional life more clearly reflect a butchering of it.

The tension I felt between humanities, aesthetic engagement and production are not unique to this era of teaching. Nearly two centuries ago, Noverre (1760), the father of ballet d'action, warned that an overemphasis on technical mastery would repress "the fertile and poetic imagination," the miraculous mystery of dance (p. 2). This is an aged-battle between the mysteries of the humanities and production yet, now more than ever, as the current wave of teaching candidates are likely graduates of high-stakes testing contexts themselves, the use of autobiography as an intellectual reprieve from the technocratic contexts of teaching and learning, is particularly necessary. This piece grapples with the possibilities of engaging the auto/biographical project, pioneered by



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Pinar and Grumet, into the work of teacher education as a counter-response to present times and as a gesture towards the never-ending work of learning to teach well.

Here, I attempt to write with the immediacy and intimacy common in memoir about my own practice of teaching English, to uncover, not what the humanities do for us, but what I (and I believe other teachers have been likely to do), have done to humanity, under the guise of teaching the humanities. In returning to my own early pedagogical memoir, I hope to experience what Madeline Grumet (1980) so beautifully described as “see[ing] oneself seeing” (p. 3).

### How and why we listen

I sat down to write this memoir, but somehow I ended up at a bar. I turned to a half-way stranger, a friend of a friend, to fill up the hour. We talked first about an art exhibit, then about children, and finally about ourselves. I told her about this opportunity to write an autobiographical piece about my work as English Educator. I told her, I want to use it as a way to listen to my early practice, to my complex relationship with the humanities and the humans who I taught. She surprised me with: “I listen for a living.”

My good fortune didn’t end there. A week or so later, at a party, a man introduced himself first by name and later, after I’d shared my idea, as “a listener who prepares listeners.” Two mornings later, the guard at the local art Museum leaned over my notepad and pointed to my crude drawing of an ear. “I use mine all the time,” he said, rocking back on his heels “just listening to what people *think* they know about these paintings.”

Here’s something that matters: three out of three strangers: an art therapist, a coordinator for Hospice Care, and a guard of curated arts, self-identified as listeners. They *listen for a living*. Here’s something else that matters: their listening was different.

The art therapist couldn’t get to listening without first sharing her repulsion to the nomenclature of her life’s work: “therapist”, she felt, “sounds like someone in a corner lurking and patient”, she laughed, “a person laying stone still.” She went on to talk about her approach to listening in a predominantly white field—comparing the ways of listening for a white therapist and a white patient to a game of narcissism. “Nah”, she said, “sometimes you need someone to be like *hello* do you hear yourself? Let’s try a new script.” She shared a description of what listening *with* someone feels like: a spiraling and tightening in her shoulders. Listening emerged from her joints and compelled her to create art alongside others.

Patients who lay stone still are at the center for Stewart, *the listener who prepares listeners*. He described the work of preparing clergy members to listen *to* people as they give their last rites. Listening to the clergy members required helping them recognize how fears and anxieties about their own mortality surfaced in their attempts at listening to patients. He kept remarking that he recognized their fears. He heard himself in their anxieties, but “adding mine to their’s would be distracting”. According to Stewart, what they needed in order to become listeners was the chance to reflect on the physical limits of their humanness. His description of *listening to* reminds me of matryoshka dolls---in the same way the dolls split in the middle to reveal a miniature but otherwise undistinguishable version of the one that came before, Stewart’s listening practice was simultaneously personal and contained.

And, different still, was the curious watchman at the museum—who likened listening to eavesdropping. He propped against the long white walls of the permanent collection waiting for a chance to correct misconceptions or to jump in with an answer to questions passed between two lovers. He pointed out that the architecture made it nearly impossible to escape the sounds of people talking and in this way, *listening in* became a Timex, his way to mark the passing hours of a work-shift. The conversations he described



were markedly less personal than the deeply human work that Denise and Stewart engaged in, but I won't write his observations off. I respected his honesty about the sensory rewards of *listening in*. "When the gallery clears" he said, "I got a new way to see something old."

It was clear to me that the distinctions in their listening practices emerged from who they are in the world and, too, were shaped by the nature and physical space of their work. I began to wonder about the ways I was inculcated into the physicality of teaching the humanities and the influence on my listening practice. In the end, it was impossible for me to listen to this lucky trio describe the distinctions between the experiences of

Listening with, \_\_\_\_\_  
Listening to, and \_\_\_\_\_  
Listening in

and not feel like I was on a stairwell descending into the earliest days of my work as English teacher.

### To Hear Dub's Song

I began my teacher life in a historically Black high school in a small, southern town known for biscuits and furniture. If you asked me then about the town, I'd say it didn't have a lot going on. I was 22, neither a furniture nor biscuit fanatic, a graduate of a private liberals arts Quaker high school and college, and an absolute outsider in the public schools. Worse, I was an outsider with instantaneous, explicit authority.

I was being trained in particular ways, antithetical to the humanities and, to the humans I was entrusted to teach. During a summer professional development session, we were handed popsicles and loaded onto fetid school buses for a zoo's-eye roaming tour of our students' neighborhoods. An administrator offered what I remember being an ahistorical and singular description of the town, pointing out public housing and neighboring, historic mansions. It was the year that non-verbal communication cues were reincarnated into that thinly veiled genre: 'urban education'; we were instructed by curriculum *experts* to touch our noses every time a student subverted control. One such expert showed us clips from the television program "Dog Whisperer" in a faculty meeting to model the concept of pack behavior and alpha control. I was shocked by the cruelty and implied metaphor of both of these professional development events, but every morning I laced up my new work shoes (all green New Balances) and did what I thought I was supposed to do.

I was being trained to be a keeper of cowrie shells. The English II team was supposed to be teaching Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*, which chronicles myriad, devastating effects of anglo-european colonial violence against the cultural, linguistic, and lived experiences of an Igbo community. It is heartbreaking. The 19<sup>th</sup> century violence that Achebe (1958) describes became backdrop to our own 21<sup>st</sup> century pedagogical version. It was recommended that I use cowrie shells in a mason jar at the front of the room as a visual thermometer of the class's behavior. "Take one out and pretend to throw it away," a mentor suggested, "in the end, they can each make one of *those* African bracelets that are so popular these days." I could say that I never dipped my fingers in that jar, but I'm no revisionist. The truth is that I wasn't paying attention to what and who I should have been. I was another first year, white teacher in training. I thought I was going to be a poet. I thought my students were going to be poets. I thought we were going to talk about poetry. But instead, I shored up the banks with a jar of store-bought cowrie shells and went about the work of colonizing with literature.

I can't stop thinking about a slim boy in the third row of that very first classroom.



He went by the name, Dub. With perfect range and impeccable rhythm he could pull up and belt out *the* song to match *the* mood of any moment. He crossed genres, decades, and teachers to spell a moment clear. Of course, back then it took me a while to hear him.

Dub liked to start his songs in the middle. During, silent reading he'd sometimes croon a flawless alto version of Bonnie Rait's (1991) *Let's give them something to talk about* out the back window—and the afternoon cheerleader practice just beyond it, “How about love, love, love, love? How about love, love, love, love?” and louder still, “How about love, love, love, love?” He thundered out Onyx's (1993) *Let the boys be boys* whenever the School Resource Officer walked by the classroom, a spattering of friends pounding against their desks “ba duh da ba duh da, SLAM”.

No matter the song, and how much I liked his music, I rushed us back to silence or to the lesson or to myself. I harbored the misconception that *his* habit was the wedge keeping us all from enjoying the pleasures of literature and I worried about hammering through the literature in preparation for our annual, district-wide writing test. If you've not already recognized that this pre-the-era-of-google kid was a virtual jukebox of throwback songs, then let me tell you about the first song of his that I truly heard, the most throw-back of his throw-backs, and then I'll follow in the art-therapist's footsteps and tell you how it felt to listen.

Dub could mimic Bonnie Rait and he could match Onyx's throaty rasp, but he had to become Cat Stevens (1970) for me to hear him. It was a rendition of the late 70's classic *Where Do the Children Play*. This is an anthem I believe he reserved for the day I'd reached towards the conch shell jar one too many times. He sang and his voice was a vinyl record and the students who watched for my reaction were the needle:

*Will you make us laugh, will you make us cry?  
Will you tell us when to live,  
will you tell us when to die?*

I wouldn't say I was *listening with* shoulders like the art therapist, Denise. Or that I was *listening in* like the security guard at the art museum. Or, that I was *listening to* prepare Dub for something greater. This listening was happening everywhere else. Something fleshy was pounding against my ribs. Something was quivering in my mousseline kneecaps. I told my brain to tell my lungs to breathe. I could hear him. I could hear some sub-text, animating the room I'd rendered so stale. Thank god I took my fingers out of that jar long enough to see Dub seeing me, at which point he shoveled into the chorus with a southern twang, an obvious false-soprano imitation of me

*I know we've come a long way  
We're changing day to day  
But tell me  
Where do the children play?*

What I know to be true is that teenagers make the finest teachers. They don't keep something going just to keep it going and they never volunteer for work that's not their own. Because of their generosity, and because I imagine they knew it was my work to do, *and* because Dub was very funny, we laughed hard at his impersonation of me.

Any avid reader knows to look for the tragedy that comes before the comic relief. I've never stopped thinking about that jar of white supremacy and all the ways I used it and all the ways it uses me.



*Listening with,*
  
*Listening to,*
  
*Listening in, and*
  
*Listening beyond*

Cook-Sather (2002) noted that power relationships, like that between teacher and student, depend upon the very kind of non-listening like that which I shared with Dub, because they “have no place for listening and actively do not tolerate it because it is very inconvenient: to really listen means to have to respond” (9). I have reflected on my interaction with Dub countless times, but I never discussed it with anyone other than Dub and some of his classmates, and not until years after they had moved on to college and me to another school. Our interpretations of it vary (my reading being closely linked with discourses of racism and schooling, and Dub’s reading being related to boredom and the rise of “American Idol,” a televised talent show). Across all of the conversations I’ve had the opportunity to be a part of, two central elements bear emphasizing: (1) Dub’s song choice was never accidental and (2) I wasn’t the only teacher he serenaded. This speaks to the problem of unexamined whiteness in teaching and teacher education and associated misuses and abuses of anti-colonial literature in curriculum. This also speaks to the importance of returning to our own pedagogical experiences as an exercise in close listening alongside those present in the moment.

### **Teacher Education and the Pedagogical Memoir**

On the power and process of the autobiographical project, Madeline Grumet (1990) argued that, “any writing and reading of our lives presents us with the challenge that is at the heart of every educational experience: making sense of our lives in the world” (p. 324). As an English teacher, I depended on autobiographical writing for this very reason. I loved memoirs for their adamance. They show us readers that we too have been in this place, pushed for example, from the comforts of childhood into the oftentimes unfathomably cruelty of adulthood, or that we might too be here, eventually—in the transability of our own bodies. I loved them for their candor, which allows us to become truth-sayers, to revisit, to come to know, and to honor the most pressing queries and tensions of our lives and to do so together as a group. In my practice, I used memoirs as mentor texts to unbraided the faux-distance between text and reader and I used them as authentic literacy prompts to unearth and make clear our interior lives. In spirit, this commitment to autobiographical writing has carried over naturally to my work as a teacher educator, where I have the responsibility of nurturing teachers who carry similar passions for the humanities.

Yet, I have a lopsided devotion to the autobiographical project that needs correcting. I’ve drawn a million times over from the wells of memoirs in my English practice, using them as provocations and as writing prompts, but rarely have I used the genre to listen to my own pedagogy as it relates to my current efforts as teacher educator. The auto/biographical project has become ubiquitous in teacher education, commonly used as a writing exercise to cultivate critical reflection and to engender equity-oriented stances amongst preservice teachers. Less common is the pedagogical auto/biographical project written from the perspective of teacher educator and used in conversation with the dilemmas of practice that teaching candidates face. In my own work as teacher educator, I often engage teaching candidates in an examination of how their teaching practices are deeply embedded in socio-cultural contexts, histories, and power struggles. Here, I wanted to use this auto/biographical experience in vulnerability to understand and engage



the teaching candidates I currently work with.

Bell hooks (1994) reminds us that “one of the tragedies in education today [is that] we have a lot of people who don’t recognize that being a teacher is being with people” (p 165). When I think back to my first-year of teaching—to all my 13 years of high school teaching—I recall near-weekly English department meetings where we buzzed between the topics of lesson plans, course alignment, preparation for standardized tests and the perpetual onslaught of test scores. I don’t recall that we thought through what it was like to be with our students or, more importantly, what it might be like for them to be with us. We were rarely *with* one another in the work of reflection; we never confronted that which kept us apart from our students, and we certainly never openly reflected on the ways in which we used, or misused, the very humanities texts we were entrusted to ‘teach.’

I turned to the medium of autobiography to deliberate on my own early practice because I wanted to re-see and “see myself seeing” the power relations embedded in my early teaching life, particularly as it relates to the humanities. The practice has been a reminder of the complexities of teaching *and* the possibilities of pedagogical transformation through difficult moments. Along these lines, I believe the process and sharing of a pedagogical memoir has the power to illustrate how critical consciousness can be non-linear, how relationships with the texts we are entrusted to teach can and should evolve, and how we might work towards a constant state of listening-relistening-seeing and re-seeing ourselves and our work.

## Notes

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