

Experiments in Creative Remembering: Towards a Theory of Adolescent Anamnesis in Teacher Education

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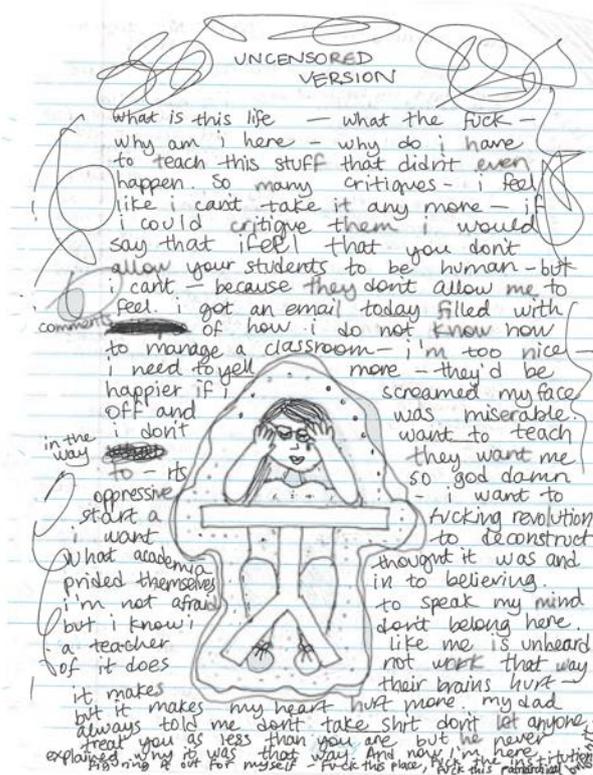
Though it figures differently in religious, philosophical, and psychoanalytic traditions, the notion of anamnesis invariably refers to an active process through which remembering invites the past into a mysterious, unpredictable, intersubjective, and often unaccountable relation. In anamnesis, remembering creates the relation; while Christians may follow Jesus' pronouncement at the last supper – “Do this in memory of me” – the point of anamnesis is not to remember the actual facts of the person or experience, but to somehow involve memory in the recreation of the past as it inheres in present life. Remembering as anamnesis is therefore not remembering as an exercise in accurate representation, but a matter of re-calling the past – in emotional, spiritual, and incorporeal terms – to bear on the scene of present life. In the context of teacher education, which often encourages the uses of memory and reflection as a means for novice teachers to situate themselves in the emergent process of learning to teach, anamnesis emphasizes the creative, experimental, and interpretive potential of the person remembering. In this short paper, I introduce the idea of adolescent anamnesis, and gesture towards its uses as a speculative strategy of creative remembering.

In John Sallis' (1999) discussion of Plato's *Timaeus*, the question of conceptualizing beginnings and origins is presented as an “exercise in remembrance” (p. 13), in which remembering involves a series of related, interior moves: “to bring something back to mind, to bring back before one's inner vision something remote, something past, something removed from the present, from presence. It is,” he continues, “to bring back to a certain presence something that nonetheless, in its pastness, is – and remains – absent” (p. 13). It is, therefore, to bring the dead alive, while also recognizing the inescapable irreversibility of time moving forward; it is remembering as re-imagining, re-envisioning, re-inhabiting, re-turning. As a piece of Platonic theory, which presupposes the soul as immortal and repeatedly incarnated, Platonic anamnesis involves a process of recollection beyond the confines of physical reality, and through which learning is reconceived as a practice of remembering and reaching back to past lives – retrieving and recapitulating forgotten knowledge that the birth of the body obscures.

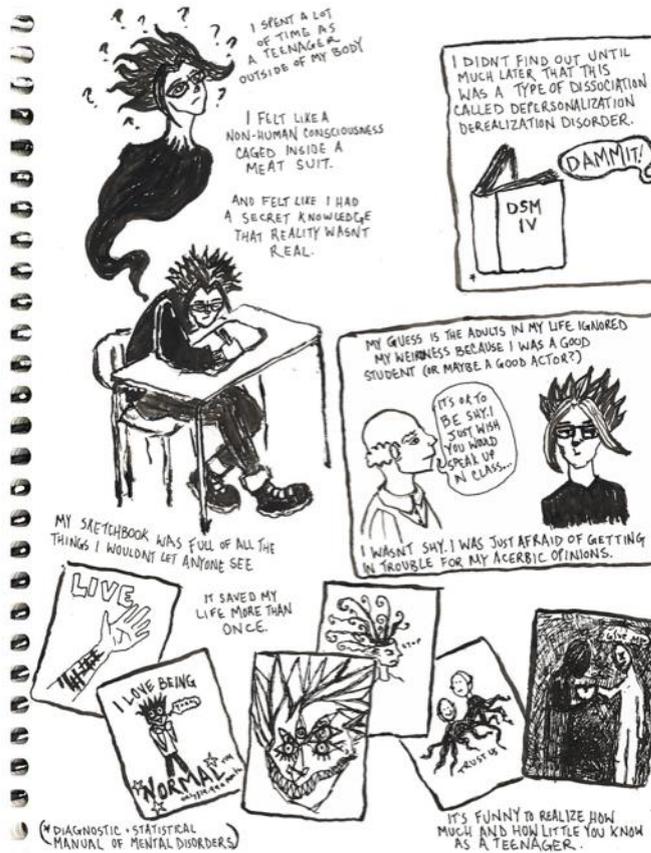


Similarly, in her consideration of the enduring significance of Kristeva's concept of the semiotic *chora*, Maria Margaroni (2005) explicitly links the development of this "theoretical supposition" (Kristeva, 1984, p. 68) to the retrospective practice of anamnesis, which Kristeva herself repeatedly describes in close relation to her psychoanalytic work. As Kristeva (2014) comments, "Freud founded psychoanalysis as an invitation to *anamnesis*, with the aim of a rebirth, or in other words, a psychical restructuring" (p. 8). Since psychoanalysis invites a similar practice of reaching back, Kristeva describes a "correspondence" between analytic work and this "older tradition of retrospective introspection" (Pollock, 1998, p. 15). However, instead of reaching to past lives, psychoanalytic anamnesis involves "the possibility of entering as far as possible into ... the most distant memories of our childhood" (p. 9). As the Platonic view understands incarnation as an inevitable process of forgetting, Kristeva considers language in similar terms: since language operates on a different register from what preceded it, this difference renders these earlier experiences as effectively forgotten and "unnameable" (p. 9). What cannot be perceived cannot be said cannot be known cannot be named. Despite this difference, however, Kristeva endeavours to reposition the psychoanalytic subject at the very limits where experience becomes un/nameable, and to reconceptualize this break in meaning and knowing as a kind of "scission that joins" (Margaroni, 2005, p. 93). In psychoanalytic remembrance *as anamnesis*, we therefore encounter a "turn backward to a past beyond memory and our representations of it" (p. 87), which also presents an alternative to the strict association of remembering with

documentary proof, and instead conceives it as anti-mimetic and inherently creative. Remembering as anamnesis is thus to stage an uncertain dialogue between different registers of untranslatable meaning; by continually questioning and displacing the past, the threshold between these temporal registers is kept alive and forever brimming, introducing the potential for what Kristeva calls "revolt," which "opens psychical life to infinite re-creation ... even at the price of errors and impasses" (p. 6). Kristevan revolt is thus a revolt against the necessity of living in linear time.



In the context in which I work and teach, I encourage others to think beyond seeing reflection and recollection as a means of knowing the self in self-evident fashion. Instead, as with Kristeva, I value moves that displace the past and through which we may stage memories less as fact than as an uncertain form of dynamic and always surprising relation



– a function akin to dreaming and poetry. In this view, remembering the past is not an engagement with a thing but with a process, and the question I ask my students is how we may represent a past that cannot be known, and how such representations – despite their inevitable gaps and insufficiencies – may teach us something about the ways in which teaching, and learning to teach, recapitulates and creatively augments the past in the ever-developing contexts of present life.

Though my advice for students embarking on these tasks of creative remembering is brief, since I teach in the context of secondary education, the majority of what is remembered relates to the time of adolescence, which Waddell (2018) emphasizes as “perhaps the most rich, challenging, and unsettled period of the life cycle” (p. 13). Indeed, though we may typically think of adolescence as inseparable from the teenage years, I encourage my students to consider the ways in which adolescent states of mind persist into adulthood, a persistence that appears as especially forceful in the similarly “unsettled period” of learning to teach. In this way, and along with Waddell, I am less concerned with conceptualizing adolescence as a strictly defined age group, than as a “process of moving towards adulthood” (p. 31) that includes a variety of states of mind, which though they may occur in the teenage years, may also be found in people of all age groups. As Waddell puts it, “the adult may be found in the baby; the infant in the adolescent; the young child in the old man; the middle-aged man in the 7-year-old boy” (p. 11). As Britzman (2012) also suggests, encounters with adolescence may often brush against areas that remain hard to accept: “adults working in schools,” she notes, “are subject to their adolescence and these elemental sets of internal conflicts, phantasies, and defenses” (p. 274). For secondary teachers and students in teacher education, these adults may thus be unexpectedly exposed to the influence of their own unresolved and disavowed *adolescent states of mind*, which Waddell emphasizes as a disposition between a series of contradictory desires and pulls:

between the adult and the infantile, ... between the tender and the aggressive, between acquisitive greed and generosity; between elation and depression; between the lures of dishonesty and the desire for truth; between hate and love; between a sense of confusion and a conviction of certainty. (p. 174)



If acts of remembering adolescence are understood in relation to the aforementioned psychoanalytic process of anamnesis, this is a recursive technique that will surely feel bewildering, as it dramatizes and reactivates the past as a means to think it anew.

Since I first began teaching at the university level, I have incorporated strategies of creative remembrance in a variety of graduate and undergraduate classes: *Teaching Composition, Language and Culture to Adolescents; Curricular Issues in English Language Arts Education; On Keeping a Notebook; Adolescence in/and Graphic Novels; The Adolescent and the Teacher*; and *Literature for Young*

Adults. In these classes, I typically ask students to keep a notebook during the length of our time together, and to use this indeterminate space, which can take any form of writing or representation they'd like, as a way to articulate thoughts, memories, and impressions about adolescence. As a way to prime our thinking about the recursive movements between adolescence and adulthood, I introduce my students to Lynda Barry's (2017)

graphic novel *One Hundred Demons*, whose art and narrative often highlights the inevitable deficiencies and absences of language, representation, and memory. In between the spaces of that which is expressible, Barry suggests a world of inexpressible excess, including all that memories



(traumatic and non-traumatic alike) simply cannot abide. Describing her work as “autobifictionalography,” the *demons* in Barry's narratives are not only physical creatures, but stray and abandoned fragments of personal history that return as unsettling reminders of the unpredictable nature of psychic life, where nothing ever dies, and temporality folds upon itself. In the unconscious, Barry's art suggests, we are all still adolescents: “Caught,” as Margot Waddell (2005) writes, “between lost childhood and unrealized adulthood” (p. 9).

Though no two instances of adolescent anamnesis – as I title these recursive experiments – will ever look the same, I have included examples throughout this paper from my students’ work, whose focus on feeling rather than fact underlines how remembering as anamnesis involves the development of a transhistorical and intersubjective relation to the past, which moves “alongside, opposite to and in the margins of history” (Margaroni, 2005, p. 84). Squeezed between the temporal nodes of past, present, and future, the memory in these compositions presses upon a fact of history that is always other than simply fact. Like the displacements of dreaming, the emphasis is therefore never on factual evidence, or whether the representation aligns with what actually happened, but how the scene describes a poetic function of memory, which includes the enduring and protean persistence of adolescent emotion. As my students describe these pieces in writing and dialogue, I encourage them into a space of collective experimentation, where what is most important is that the meaning remains unsettled and always in new relation, so that the meaning of the past may be seen in similarly unsettled fashion.



Notes

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