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When Affect Meets the Relational: A Dialogical, Life Writing Approach to English Studies

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WHEN AFFECT MEETS THE RELATIONAL: A DIALOGICAL, LIFE WRITING
APPROACH TO ENGLISH STUDIES

D. SHANE COMBS

141 Pages

This dissertation responds to a lack of explicit conversation and pedagogical approaches inclusive of both life writing and interior individual experiences in composition studies. Broken into three chapters (beyond the introduction), the first serves to consider the detrimental impact composition studies has on interiority when it equates the internal with expressivism (Bishop; Newkirk; Gradin; Murray). This chapter focuses on the life writing of Donald Murray, a composition scholar pivotal to one-on-one conferencing and the process movement in composition. This chapter considers how elements of Donald Murray's work—aleness, one-to-one relational, and vulnerability—might overlap with introverts and highly sensitive people. If Murray is dismissed, then, it stands to reason, so might be introverts and highly sensitive people. This first chapter reimagines Murray and his work, claiming that the imaginal and interior relational experiences we have are intrinsically valuable *and* that they have transfer into the more traditional spaces we view as social and relational. If the first chapter begins to conceptualize these ideas, the second chapter (listed as Chapter 3) features them pedagogically in a classroom experience. Chapter 3 centers student voice from an Advanced Composition course I taught as “Bearing Witness through Life Writing.” How do students respond when life writing is centered in a composition course and how do they take up what we have too long made contradictory, including personal/societal, interior/exterior, and affect and critical thinking? In the final chapter,

I move from an affective-relational pedagogy in an explicit life writing space to an affective-relational pedagogy in a course about joy. Do the elements previously listed stand up in such a differently themed course? Does joy carry academic value? Can a personal *and* societal, interior *and* exterior, affective *and* critical approach to joy also be inclusive of the trauma and challenges faced in and around the students engaging in the subject matter? The findings described in this dissertation have implications for teacher education, for composition and life writing, and for anyone looking to take up a more relational and dialogical approach to their personal and professional lives.

KEYWORDS: affect; relational; pedagogy; composition; life writing

WHEN AFFECT MEETS THE RELATIONAL: A DIALOGICAL, LIFE WRITING
APPROACH TO ENGLISH STUDIES

D. SHANE COMBS

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial
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for the Degree of

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APPROACH TO ENGLISH STUDIES

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Composition studies has had a start-stop relationship with the idea of emotion and affect in research, writing, and pedagogy. Many are the witnesses, from within our own tent, who have felt stifled in their attempts to forward learning on affect and emotion within research, writing, and pedagogy. Alice Brand, in “Twenty Years: Reflections and Questions,” wonders openly about our progress (or lack thereof) when she writes, “Was anyone left talking about emotion?” (13). Brand also reports feeling that, because of its subject matter, her first book, *Therapy in Writing*, was “completely ignored,” “not reviewed,” “not critiqued,” “invisible” (10). Kia Jane Richmond, in “Repositioning Emotions in Composition,” reports a more subtle redirection when it comes to ideas on emotion and affect. Richmond posits that work on affect was downplayed in composition because scholars feared being “labeled instantaneously as expressivists” (70). The tag of *expressivist*, often assigned rather than claimed, has the power to marginalize if not prevent a successful future in composition (the very assumption of expressivism in one’s thinking, as one professor once told me, through her own laughter, “makes you look like you’ve not read research for forty years!”). Thus, it should not be taken lightly how this fear may have deterred potential scholarship into areas like emotion and affect, terms too many times automatically associated with the long-dreaded *e-word*. Many other composition scholars have tried, with varying results, to navigate claims of expressivism in order to pursue desired affective work in composition (Bishop; Newkirk; Gradin).

In a recent special edition on emotion in *Composition Forum*, the editors remind us that, “Every day, whether we are teaching writing, administering writing programs, or writing ourselves, emotion is already working for us and against us” (Weisser, Reiff, Bawarshi, Langdon). In my article for *Composition Forum*, “Queering Time and Space: Donald Murray as

Introvert Whisperer,” I add that, “for those with highly-sensitive temperaments, who currently lack framework and representation, the statement of emotions working against us may be doubly true” (Combs).

In this dissertation, *When Affect Meets the Relational: A Dialogical, Life Writing Approach to English Studies*, I propose a two-fold approach to addressing affect in research, writing, and pedagogy. The first approach is to bring potential representation and self-actualization to high sensing people (HSPs), a group of people, according to Elaine Aron, who number approximately 15-20% of the population and who experience the world through heightened nervous systems, which leads to overstimulation and very nuanced and affective uptakes of the world around them. I bring this lens to my dissertation, in part, because I am an HSP. I know what it’s like to flounder in and out of the academy for almost three decades because not only did I not understand my uptake of the world, but those who chose the kind of research and writing I could do, along with the pedagogy that I was often subjected to, didn’t understand high sensitivity, either. In this regard, to understand the HSP is to understand some affective approaches to the world (and thus, some potential approaches to research, writing, and pedagogical choices). For instance, now knowing my uptake of the world, it is not shocking that an aesthetic sensitivity to certain language and storytelling influenced me to switch from creative writing to composition only after reading bell hooks and Donald Murray in my first “Teaching Composition” course (not realizing that hooks was not specifically composition and that, in his final years, Donald Murray was rejected from composition journals because his work was too “Murrayesque”). While bringing representation to HSPs will never be an exclusive way to view affect, I argue it is one of many ways to begin anew conversations on affect without having a too-tired conversation about expressivism.

I write “begin anew,” but that statement is only partly true. Conversations on emotion have been thriving in composition in the last ten years, mostly from a rhetorical, cultural, social-constructivist perspective. If we read Laura R. Micciche’s “Staying with Emotion” from the aforementioned *Composition Forum* special on emotions, we come to recognize a vast array of places where emotion work has been taken up. Micciche herself writes that, since her 2007 book, *Doing Emotion: Rhetoric, Writing, Teaching*, that even she has “been amazed to see (and unable to keep pace with) the staggering amount of composition research that elaborates on emotion as woven into a wide array of cultural and professional activities” (Micciche). Micciche states the importance of the rhetorical in the current movement on emotions—“that is, emotions do not simply exist but are *made* between people and in relation to objects” (Micciche). For the purposes of the work that I am doing in this dissertation—an HSP presenting an affective-relational pedagogy from a life writing perspective—I say, “no and yes” to Micciche. “No” because I make a hard break from the social constructivist point of view, as I claim, with the scholars who forward ideas on HSPs (Aron; Cater; Grimen & Diseth), that being an HSP is temperamental and with us from birth. This break alone, early in the dissertation and of absolute necessity from an HSP-POV, may be enough for this work to be ignored or discredited by some. The issue I have with this sort of response, however, as someone who *also* puts forth a relational, rhetorical, social constructivist point of view in my work (my “yes” to Micciche), is the mistake we make in believing that just because a disposition is with us from birth (or, for some, that any quality we claim *can* be with us from birth) means that it *could not* be taken up and addressed in the same social-relational conventions as the many elements we take up this way year-in-and-year-out. To this idea, I would say of social construction what I highlight Arthur Bochner saying of cultural ideas in the following paragraph: when we go too far with any idea, we are in danger

of making that idea become both everything and nothing, which should worry any scholar about any idea.

I recognize that the moves I make here are *nuanced*—straddling theoretical lines the field may too often see as ‘unstraddleable.’ In this regard, I take with faith Micciche’s claim that “emotion’s stickiness (a concept indebted to Sara Ahmed) invites adaptations appropriate to a variety of research interests” (Micciche). We have seen these adaptations in composition’s history, for the betterment of the field and the people within it. As Micciche herself notes, it was feminist scholars (Lindquist; Worsham; Yoon) who theorized “emotion as relational, socially and culturally specific.” As Micciche puts forth, it is with the experiential, the relational, the social, cultural, and emotional *inclusions* that we see rigid structures, such as the reason-emotion binary, lose the default position in our conversations. These adaptations on emotion, rich and increasing, change the landscape and its possibilities from under our feet. Adam J. Banks, in *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*, calls upon Paul D. Miller in his opening epigraph, challenging us to “describe or characterize what it feels like to be alive now” (2). For Banks, the DJ scratch takes on affective proportions, able to stop, to cut, to disrupt. Here African American rhetoric, fused with emotional urgency, challenges traditional writing, current multimodal approaches, and dominant ideologies in and beyond the classroom space. Ligia Ana Mihut, in “Literacy Brokers and the Emotional Work of Mediation,” part of a burgeoning movement of transnational and translingual work, fuses emotion with “the power of writing a personal story” (57). Mihut coins literacy of affinity or “a discursive repertoire comprised of language of empathy, personal experiences, and even social relations embedded in the literate experience” (58). What each of these adaptations on emotion conclude can be found in four words from Mihut: “emotions have rhetorical force” (59). In this regard, this dissertation is *of* the

movements and motions made in composition the last forty years, but it is an adaptation that makes space for representation of HSPs. When Mihut writes about points of affinity as “moments of identification...[that] must engage the entire personhood,” I can’t help but think of HSP scholar, Kaaryn Cater, who made it her mission to get literature on high sensitivity into the hands of the undergraduate arts majors she worked with. After which, some 60% of those students identified as HSPs and made statements like the ones that follow: “Wow! I feel normal!”; “This helps me to deal with ongoing stresses!”; “Without you I would hang out in the world like a ghost, but thanks to you I am not a ghost anymore” (28-29). The work of making visible the literature and literacy around high sensitivity, then, *is* emotional brokering. It is the work I seek to do in this dissertation, and not only is this work grounded in affective labor, but as I will now argue, this work necessitates a life writing methodological approach to make visible what I call an affective-relational approach to a living composition.

This second approach to affect in my dissertation lies in using life writing, explicitly by name, as a methodological approach to research, writing, and pedagogy. It is staggering, as someone interested in how affect is stifled in the academy, to see the very conversations I’ve highlighted in early composition, described almost entirely the same (only with differing terminology) in the social sciences. Just like with composition, some scholars in the social sciences have been fighting for many decades to utilize affective approaches in research, writing, and pedagogy (Bochner; Ellis & Rewicki; Richardson). In “Narrative’s Virtues,” Art Bochner lays out (once of many times) his reasons for taking up narrative in his research, writing, and pedagogy. Contrary to ideas of navel-gazing or a reliance on some individual, capital-T Truth, Bochner, like so many mentioned above, marks his interest in these approaches by a need for work that is personal, relational, and societal. Bochner sees what he calls autoethnography (and

what I will call life writing through an affective-relational approach) as a pushback against research that equates “knowing exclusively with seeing from a distance” (138). The bias of “scientific work,” then, “[helps] us foster the illusion that our own relationships have little impact on our work: what we see, how we reflect on and interpret our results, what questions we ask, what answers we expect” (138). Along with Carolyn Ellis, who views autoethnography as personal *and* relational, Bochner refuses the idea that our research is “divorced from our lives,” stating instead that our work does, in fact, have an “autobiographical dimension” (138). With Bochner, the methodological approaches in this dissertation will actively resist “ritualized symbolic violence that is so characteristic of the academy....[where] one speaker courteously tries to demolish another, using polite language to show the other’s stupidity, ignorance, or narrowness” and, instead, the approaches in this dissertation will focus on a way of knowing that promotes “multiple forms of representation and research; away from facts and towards meanings; away from master narratives and toward local stories; away from idolizing categorical thought and abstracted theory and toward embracing the values of... emotionality, and activism; away from assuming the stance of disinterested spectator and toward assuming the position of a feeling, embodied, and vulnerable observer; away from writing essays and toward telling stories” (134-135). In this regard, I hope to move past the polar extremes of life writer as expressivist searching for capital-T Truth versus critical culturalists so embedded in their own views that, as Bochner relays of Edward Rothstein, “the idea of culture is...in danger of becoming simultaneously everything and nothing” (136). In actuality, life writing, as research, as writing, as pedagogy, can be used in many directions, from a very narrow expressivist view, to a focus on rhetoric, or culture, or, as I will put forth in this dissertation, as an approach to an affective-relational pedagogy that allows students and instructors the opportunity to bear witness to each

other, to be changed in and with each other, and to take up the world affectively, through tiny promptings, in ways that might disrupt business as usual and give us what so many of us long for—a temporary space in which we can begin to take up ways of writing, researching, and being that can disrupt the *too-habitual* ways we've come to see, know, and process the world around us.

In this regard, I begin to define what I call an affective-relational pedagogy in Chapter 2, through the oft-misunderstood work of composition scholar, Donald Murray. In Chapter 3, I put on display my first course built around an affective-relational pedagogy, an Advanced Composition course I taught as “Bearing Witness through Life Writing.” Finally, in Chapter 4, I focus on a course that, at the time, I believed to be a step away from life writing, one in which I taught a course on joy and *Harry Potter*. Yet, not only was life writing and an affective-relational pedagogy present in that course, it became a defining factor.

My invitation to the reader (often imagined as teachers or students) is to go along on this journey with me. Ponder the ideas put forth to you in a theoretical and experiential blend. Bear witness to them, in that they are theories and experiences that, as the reader will see, impacted the lives of teachers and students. But, also, do the affective, dialogical work that is modeled in the pages to follow: pay attention to felt promptings when reading certain passages (“What am I feeling and how might that affect my life?”) and take with you what is take-able for you, and, as for what you leave behind, do so with no worries. But do understand it enough to recognize it (or the need for it) in another the next time you see it.

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CHAPTER II: DONALD MURRAY AND A CASE FOR A HIGH SENSING LIFE
WRITING IN COMPOSITION

I've come to believe in the give and take of personal legacies, that life is primarily about the inheritance of things from those who come before us, and about sorting out the good from the bad, and about passing along to the next generation our own version of the good.

- Roy Peter Clark, "The Take and the Give: A Tribute to Don Murray"

It will come as no surprise to those in composition who are familiar with Donald Murray that the uptake surrounding him varies from wild praise to scathing critique. In fact, if one were to gather just a handful of writings about Murray, they would read about an individual described as "resilient" and "gifted" (Smith); "a pivotal figure in the writing process movement" (Ballenger); "one of the High Priests of Process" (Romano); a figure in an "expressionistic rhetoric....easily co-opted by the very capitalistic approaches it opposes" (Berlin); a representative "of the old, the worn-out, the self-centered" diminished and tucked away like "the money-earning but foolishly-dressed grandfather in the back study" (Bishop).

For those who are not familiar with Donald Murray, he was a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist who transitioned into a career as a professor of composition at the University of New Hampshire in 1963. Too often forgotten, much of Murray's work came as pushback to a time in composition where grammar, and other formal elements, were treated with the highest priority. As such, Murray emphasized students as writers, with an emphasis on writers needing to find their own voice. This would lead to Murray's association with both the writing process

movement and one-on-one conferences, as Murray relegated issues of grammar to later student drafts and frontloaded earlier drafts as a writerly journey into voice, discovery, and concept. Much of this emphasis on the individual, journey, and voice, as we will come back to in this essay, would also lead to Murray's later marginalization in the field as an expressivist.

For those familiar with Murray, the fascination around his impact and later isolation in the field is such that several scholars (Ballenger; Bishop; Newkirk & Miller) have taken up an occurrence that happened in the later stages of Murray's publishing attempts in the composition field. In this oft-discussed exchange, Murray is invited to submit to one of the top publications in composition only to have his writing rejected because it is too "Murrayesque." To quote that passage more fully, "This is a pleasant piece, very practical, and Murrayesque. But it doesn't make the sort of generalizations and theoretical moves we need" (Ballenger 297).

In the past three decades, the legacy of Donald Murray has been thought dead then resurrected more times than the mythological trickster gods that Murray's temperament in some ways embodies. Indeed, I too have found myself enamored by the "Murrayesque" term in the quote above. Five years ago, in fact, I began writing an article that would become "Queering Time and Space: Donald Murray as Introvert Whisperer," in which I made a case that the work that Murray is known for, including doing so many one-on-one conferences that, according to Ballenger, it "stunned even those most dedicated to the conference pedagogy," can serve as representation for how introverts might more comfortably and more effectively/affectively make their way in the teaching field. I stand by that article as *a* guide for introverts, but also understand, I was writing it, back then, *as* an introvert who was terrified of making his way into the teaching profession. Five years later, I am not terrified. I have found ways, through my introversion (and sometimes around it), to connect with students who have diverse life

experiences, goals, and desires. I have accomplished this, in large part, by developing what I call *a high sensing, affective-relational pedagogy*.

After a few years of developing this affective-relational pedagogy, moving between theory and classroom experience, I began fleshing out the ideas through articles (“Can I Be/Get a Witness: An Open Letter to the Life Writing Students I’ve Not Yet Met”; “Developing an Affective-Relational Pedagogy: Teaching Advanced Composition as Bearing Witness through Life Writing”). In my work, I’ve consistently framed affective-relational pedagogy as *what emerges at a felt-and-conceptual level when instructor and students prioritize bearing witness in and beyond the classroom space*. Within that single sentence, readers can spot the affective (“what emerges at a felt...level”) and the relational (“when students prioritize bearing witness in and beyond the classroom space”). All of this is well enough as a description of an affective-relational pedagogy but lost in translation is that the origins of this classroom approach came from my resistance to the binaries of social/personal and social/expressivist. In this regard, I sought nuance on both the terms *affect* and *relational* when it came to their potential purposes and applications. In other words, while I often used *affect* in regards to an individual student response, any affective response was always greater than personal or individual in that it came through social interaction (be it classroom discussion or, for instance, reading memoir for homework) and it could impact multiple people at once. On the flip side, the *relational*, while clearly social in its multiple-person application, could also be applicable in a person’s private relationship with imaginal versions of the people in their lives, as well as with stories, both fictional and nonfictional, that no one other than the individual knows they are reading or being impacted by. The problem, however, came when I sat down to write about my pedagogy. It was the second nuance—that the relational can also be personal/individual—that I would most often

leave out or downplay. It wasn't purposefully, but I do believe it came from a fear that too much talk of a personal-relational would lead me right back to the forever-critique of expressivism.

It just so happened that, as I was writing "Developing an Affective-Relational Pedagogy: Teaching Advanced Composition as Bearing Witness through Life Writing," I was also reading Donald Murray's less-cited work: his life writing (particularly his memoir, *My Twice Lived Life*). Though that article will not show explicit evidence of this connection, it was in reading Murray's vulnerable, high sensing life writing (which will be the focus of this essay) that I added the lens in which I've italicized here, when stating that affective-relational pedagogy

centers on neither of the two binary choices we are sometimes given—
individual/isolated or social/political. Instead, an affective-relational pedagogy is dialogical and posits that we are always in relation, both to the world beyond ourselves (our classmates, instructors, reading materials, friends, family, and greater social/political contexts) *as well as to our interior lives (the conversations we have by ourselves, with ourselves, with imaginal others)*.

Even now, saying that I was responding to the "work" of Donald Murray isn't quite the word I'm looking for. The "writing" of Donald Murray? Sure. The "life" of Donald Murray? He passed away seven years before I "met" him, but absolutely. Yet, it is here, in the "writing" and the "life" of Donald Murray, in his putting his "Murrayesque" on display, that I find him once more guiding and informing my work.

In fact, it is the explicit vulnerability in Murray's writing that reminds me I have, in some ways, been hiding my own. My affective-relational pedagogy was born out of being someone

who identifies as a highly sensitive introvert¹ trying to find his way in the teaching profession. Despite the actuality of this statement, this will be the first time I've written explicitly about high sensitivity when writing about the pedagogy that was inspired by it. And despite this pedagogy being born while teaching life writing in the composition classroom, this is also the first time I am taking up the life writing of Donald Murray. What seems to have been collapsed in my previous work, then, are some of the experiential aspects that have informed my theory. It seems easier, at least from what I've seen of our field, to write as scholar/theorist, lest we find ourselves, as Murray did, being dismissed as expressivists and/or practitioners. These reasons are, I believe, exactly why it has taken until now to really shine a light on the *indirect* aspects of the relational. This is why, in this essay, I focus on the lesser studied works of Donald Murray, primarily his life writing memoir, *My Twice-Lived Life*. So many times, others and I, with the best of intentions, have sought to release Donald Murray of the claims made by some theorists, and we've done so by entering into conversations that privilege the very theorists we seek to refute. Here I seek to bypass that well-trod ground in order to foreground the experiential, the practitioner and his reasons why, and I seek to do this through the medium of the high sensing experiential that is life writing.

¹ I will break down high sensitivity later in this essay. In general, it is thought to be a personality trait, found in roughly 1 to 5 people, that constitutes a sensitive nervous system, deep awareness of subtleties in one's environment, along with, in some contexts, a potential to be easily overwhelmed and overstimulated. A majority, though not all of highly sensitive persons, are thought to be introverts.

The essay that follows, then, is for the professor whose practice informs their theory, or who believes their practice is worthy to stand alone as an essay, leaving itself ready to be taken up and theorized by another. It is for the student who may never engage the social world around them if they are not allowed to openly engage their own self in it. It is for those who might take up the term *learner* or *writer* or *seeker* or *searcher* to best describe themselves. It is for those, like Ballenger, who understand the critique of the “Murrayesque” to be a critique of “strong personal voice; the autobiographical digression; the mixing of genres...” (297). It is for those who may define themselves, as I will describe in the next section, as highly sensitive (or, as I prefer it, *high sensing*). It is for those who understand (or who are willing to come to understand) that when I spend this essay writing about Murray (indeed, in explicitly personal ways through his own life writing), at the heart of this conversation on Murray is a Murrayesque-ness that I believe makes space for high sensitivity and introverted ways of being, in that it privileges surprise (“My students become writers at that moment when they first write what they do not expect to write”); creation over critique (with E.M. Forster, Murray writes ““Think before you speak, is criticism’s motto; speak before you think is creation’s””); a creative relational (“Surprise breeds surprise”); a metaphorical that is also embodied (with Denise Levertov, ““You can smell the poem before you can see it””) (Writing and Teaching for Surprise).

This essay keeps in mind that, for many in composition, these “Murrayesque” ways of being have been a *stopping point*, rather than a *starting point*. Thus, this essay asks, “When we reject the “Murrayesque” from the start, who other than Murray might we also be rejecting?” I propose that the deep-dive that will follow in this essay, into Murray’s life through Murray’s life writing, opens a space to consider a high sensing life writing approach in composition, one that

can benefit students of any disposition but, as I will discuss specifically, can especially be of benefit to the highly sensitive student and teacher.

High Sensing Origins: Affect Affliction and/or Affect Affiliation

Donald Murray's life writing story starts where difficulty begins for many, and where Elaine Aron has noted difficulty especially begins with highly sensitive people: in childhood trauma. While I will use this section to create language in support of Aron's "wound with no name," as well as touch upon Murray's struggle with childhood trauma through his writing in *My Twice-Lived Life*, I will begin by providing some of the literature on what it means to be a highly sensitive person.

The concept of sensory processing sensitivity (SPS), or, the term made popular by Elaine Aron, highly sensitive temperament, has been researched for more than twenty years. In "The Highly Sensitive Brain: An fMRI Study of Sensory Processing and Response to Others' Emotions," authors, Bianca P. Acevedo, Elaine Aron, Arthur Aron, Matthew-Donald Sangster, Nancy Collins, and Lucy L. Brown write of how high sensitivity is "proposed to be an innate trait associated with greater sensitivity (or responsivity) to environmental and social stimuli" and how high sensitivity "is becoming increasingly associated with identifiable genes, behavior, physiological reactions, and patterns of brain activation" (580). They also add that a "functionally similar trait—termed responsivity, plasticity, or flexibility (Wolf et al. 2008)—has been observed in over 100 nonhuman species including pumpkinseed sunfish (Wilson et al. 1993), birds (Verbeek et al. 1994), rodents (Koolhaas et al. 1999), and rhesus macaques (Suomi 2006)" (580). In "Relationship between the Temperament of Sensory Processing Sensitivity and Emotional Reactivity", Jadzia Jagiellowicz, Elaine Aron, and Arthur Aron write that high

sensitivity is thought to be “found in about 20% of humans and involving a deeper...cognitive processing of stimuli, or associative elaboration (Mesulam, 1998)” and that it is “hypothesized to be associated with higher emotional reactivity (Aron et al. 2012)” (185-186). Carlos V. Rizzo-Sierra, Martha E. Leon-Sierra, and Fidias E. Leon-Sarmiento, in “Higher Sensory Processing Sensitivity, Introversion and Ectomorphism: New Biomarkers for Human Creativity in Developing Rural Areas,” write that high sensitivity allows some 20% of the population to “process information deeper than usual” making high sensing people “more prone to arousal, especially after exposure to sense stressors such as bright lights, loud noise, strong smells as well as dense and chaotic environments” (159). The authors continue by stating that high sensitivity requires “more quiet time daily to be alone” and correlates “with higher perception, consciousness, inventiveness, imagination and creativity, including “a high heart rate above standard values when confronted to new situations” (159-160).

It has been the labor of many of the researchers mentioned to demonstrate that high sensitivity is neither a positive nor a negative trait. (It can be either depending on context.) When high sensitivity has had more of a negative impact on highly sensitive people, however, has been in conjunction with childhood trauma and abuse. Speaking to what she calls “the wound with no name” in “A Talk on High Sensitivity,” Aron states the following:

If you had a troubled childhood, then you want to work on healing those wounds, so that you’re not being affected by depression and anxiety and all that stuff so much. And that’s a project. It can be a big project for many sensitive people. I know a lot of sensitive people are wrestling with really horrific childhoods. In fact, I wrote a blog...“The Wound with No Name,” because of the certain people among us who cannot work, cannot be in a relationship, or are chronically ill with

something that's highly stress related. And when we notice them or find out, talk to them and find out....I mean, nobody knows why they are that way. But if you go and ask, you will always, almost always, find a story of a troubled childhood. So, we don't have a name for it. We don't have any way, you know, it's not visible. But it's there, and I know a lot of highly sensitive people deal with that. And then people say, "Well, everybody had a troubled childhood" or "Just forget about the past," but you can't when you're highly sensitive. (Aron)

I was fortunate that, by the time I came across Aron's "wound with no name," I had been a graduate student, a scholar, and a teacher. Composition and rhetoric taught me what needed to be done. I needed to give language to Aron's wound with no name, to which, I constructed two terms: *affect affliction* and *affect affiliation*. That both words begin in affect demonstrates what is different for the person with a sensitive nervous system: they will often initially and powerfully take up the world through an embodied felt sense. This is fair enough, no better or worse than someone whose nervous system doesn't make them prone to overstimulated uptakes of their environment. But what do we imagine happens to a person whose primary uptake of the world is affective when they are taught, through abuse in childhood, that their felt sense is a trigger for potential trauma to come? It was my experience, as a child, that I came to hate my own felt sense (and, thus, to hate my own self, especially while in and around the social world), as, whether it was potentially violent spaces or at school trying to talk to someone I just met, I associated *any* strong felt sense with *trauma*. In conjunction, when negotiating felt sense and the traumatic, with a lack of information available on high sensitivity, it's not like most children or young adults can simply consult the literature as to what is going on. This combination, then, becomes particularly damning. Now we have a young person who may take up the world in a high sensing manner,

but also: doesn't know how or why; comes to relate their felt sense to trauma; defines their sensitive uptakes in a singular, negative manner. This is why, in such cases, affect is translated as an *affliction*.

Affect affiliation, however, focuses on what can happen when a high sensing person comes into affiliation with people and situations that, quite simply, allow them time, space, and safety to explore, discover, and demonstrate their sensitivities in more healthy and robust manners. Affect affiliation, then, while not a cure-all for the trauma, is a coming into relationship with people and spaces that allow us to reflect, to speak, to write, to engage, to be heard, to try out and try on our felt senses in ways that will not be ridiculed, mocked, or punished but will be witnessed and dialogued with. In both my personal and professional life, the space I've seen that most allows for a redeeming of time, a moving from affect affliction to affiliation, is an ongoing, reflective, life writing based classroom where students are surrounded by relational and dialogical witnesses.

It becomes relatively easy, then, as I approach Aron, a psychologist, from the lens of a teacher and life writer, to try to expound upon this wound with no name. Aron puts forth that if you approach the person in affect affliction, "you will always, almost always...find a story..." (Aron). This is something life writers already know: you will *always* find a story. This is something that Donald Murray, in his seventies, knows, as, even though he begins *My Twice-Lived Life* post-heart attack, so much of his memoir focuses on his abusive childhood. That there is *always* a story is something, I would argue, that most people know in some vague way. But there is a difference—a sharp difference which will be articulated throughout the remainder of this essay—between knowing the impact of story, from afar, and stepping up, stepping in, and,

stepping with an affective-relational community of those doing similar work—engaging story at the level of narrative (re)creation.

Murray’s Affect Affliction as a Through Line in *My Twice-Lived Life*

The term affect affliction makes visible the negative reaction a high sensing person might have to their own affect, especially as it pertains to relational situations, after being raised in a traumatic or abusive home environment. It is important to note, when discussing this scenario, that Aron uses the word “cannot” twice in a run of three ways a high sensing person in affect affliction might suffer: “cannot work, cannot be in a relationship, or [is] chronically ill with something that’s highly stress related” (Aron). What the high sensing person in affect affliction cannot do, then, is usually *social*. While Aron admits, rightly, that the reaction to this suffering is often that “everyone has a bad childhood,” the reason a high sensing person might suffer *especially* in a traumatic home environment (and be unable to let go of the experience later in life) may come down to two negative potentials for the highly sensitive person. In “Is the Relationship between Sensory-Processing Sensitivity and Negative Affect Mediated by Emotional Regulation,” Kimberly Brindle, Richard Moulding, Kaitlyn Bakker, and Maja Nedeljkovic, write:

[i]n a study examining components of SPS, Liss, Mailloux, and Erchull (2008) identified that two potential subfacets of SPS (ease of excitation, becoming mentally overwhelmed by internal and external demands) and low sensory threshold (becoming unpleasantly aroused by external stimuli) appeared to represent the negative aspects of SPS, as both were positively related to anxiety and depression” whereas “[t]he third facet, aesthetic

awareness and appreciation, does not appear to relate to negative mood (Liss et al., 2008).” (215)

Thus, one-and-a-half of the two ways high sensing persons may be negatively impacted for having highly sensitive temperaments are *externally* related. The highly sensitive person might suffer ease of excitement, becoming mentally overwhelmed by internal and external demands and they might have a low sensory threshold, becoming unpleasantly aroused by external stimuli. With this knowledge available, we might ask, how much *easier* an ease of excitement and how much *lower* a low sensory threshold, when one’s very home, at the most vulnerable time in one’s life, is more a place where they are under attack than under the nourishment of a loving family?

In this regard, it doesn’t matter that childhood is the *furthest away* reality of the life of a seventy-plus-year-old Donald Murray when he sits down to write *My Twice-Lived Life*. It doesn’t matter that the memoir, relatively short at just over 200 pages, addresses his heart attack, his father dying of a heart attack, being in war, talking about war, aging, writing, craft, and seven decades in one man’s life. With a careful read, and perhaps, even one not so careful, it is clear what is foundational in the life of Donald Murray, and that is his abusive and traumatic childhood. While the core of that abuse is captured in chapter 15, “Unmasking,” the effects of the abuse have a way of reaching into the majority of the chapters, especially when those chapters deal with the narratives Murray has formed about himself—narratives that it seems, at least through this telling of his life, have hardened around his image of himself as isolated, which seems to Murray a truer self than his social self, where he’s always wearing a mask. Even when Murray writes about his life choices, those choices, so often, seem reactionary against a childhood that, indirectly, still has an integral effect on his lived trajectory.

While I could write an entire chapter on the abuses Murray suffered as a child—verbal, physical, sexual, emotional—I will, instead, paint a brief picture, in Murray’s own words, of that suffering. Towards the physical abuse, Murray, as early as chapter one, writes that he had detached himself from the experience of a heart attack like he had learned to “detach [himself] from the whiplash pain of the leather shaving strap” (5). In regards to the verbal abuse, in “Unmasking,” Murray writes most about his mother. In her eyes, Murray was “in turn, too fat, too thin, too fat, too thin, then finally, in adulthood, too fat” (148). As Murray continues in this dialogue, he highlights what may well separate a sensitive uptake of the world from one not as much: the *degree* to which the commentary gets to Murray. “Perhaps another child would have shrugged off her daily comments,” writes Murray, “but I accepted them. If the City of Quincy had passed an ordinance that I could not go out except after dark, I would have understood” (148). Here, in affect affliction, one might notice how an imagination darkened by abuse leads Murray to involve the entire town in the trauma. Now, Murray imagines, it might be rightful that the entire town treat him like his mother treats him. To understand this multiplication of affliction is to better understand high sensing people raised in trauma and, too often, anyone raised in trauma. At such a young age, one’s felt sense seems to know more about lived experience than one’s ability to reason, and, with abuse, all there is for felt sense to point to is the potential for more abuse.

In actuality, the entire town didn’t treat Murray like his mother did. But his mother’s treatment of Murray was such that it was only later in life that Murray realized how much more deeply his mother’s abuse extended beyond her words. This is a theme throughout *My Twice-Lived Life*, how Murray began to finally come to new narratives towards the end of his life, and this one, as no surprise to anyone putting forth an affective-relational pedagogy, came only when

Murray was bearing witness to another human being about writing. In Murray's account, a young woman, "a victim of incest and a friend of one of my daughters," came to him for advice on writing her story. "As she tells me some of the difficult details, I find myself telling her—to make her less embarrassed—how my mother would take a bar of Ivory soap, cut it away with a kitchen knife while I had to wait knowing what was coming. She cut it down to the shape of a small baseball bat with eight sharp, beveled edges. Then she would bend me over the bathtub edge and with one swift, hard unrelenting shove force it up my rectum" (36-37). Here Murray and the young woman have done what bearing witness requires, listened deeply to each other's accounts, and Murray is staggered by the three-word response in this affective-relational exchange.

"That's sexual abuse," (37) says the young woman.

With relational witnessing now impacting Murray's life (and thus, his life writing), Murray experienced what many of my students would claim during a course I taught on "Bearing Witness through Life Writing:" that a high sensing, affective relational approach to life writing caused them to go back and *update their outdated narratives*. Suddenly Murray, who had always remembered himself as a young boy in the encounters with his mom, could not "remember when [he] did not have a homemade suppository shoved up [his] rear" (37). Suddenly Murray located the narrative that kept the concept of sexual abuse at bay: "I thought every boy and girl received this anticonstipation treatment" (37). This, of course, isn't the case, but it took the anger of a stranger towards the act of Murray's mother to make Murray consider the scene again, this time from *without* the old, outdated narrative. Writes Murray:

I realize [where the abuse took place] is a flat to which we moved when I was fourteen years old, the place where I grew taller than Mother and Father; tall

enough to tell my father that if he hit me again, I would coldcock him; big enough to get night newspaper jobs by saying I was twenty-one, then twenty-two; strong enough to get a football scholarship to a junior college after not graduating from high school; fearless enough to explore—alone—the streets and alleys of Boston; and still my mother bent me over the tub edge and rammed those suppositories up my rear end. (37-38)

It would be years later, in another relational situation, this time with a therapist, that Murray would know, at an affective level, that he was starting to not only accept this narrative for what it was, but that he was starting to experience some kind of healing. Towards this healing, Murray writes, “Silly as it seems, shampooing was the convincer for me. I hated to wash my hair. It hurt. I thought my scalp was particularly sensitive, because each time I shampooed I felt my mother’s fingers digging into my scalp and felt my skull banging against the faucets in the sink” (203-204). Eventually, after moving through these affective-relational exchanges, towards an updated lived experience, Murray states, “But one day I washed my hair and no pain. My scalp wasn’t sensitive. My mother’s fingers no longer dug into my skull” (204).

Here Murray (and I) have walked the reader into what has too often been a fence against life writing in composition: the instructor as not-therapist. If we carefully read the sequence above, however, we would see that Murray never would have progressed to even consider seeing a therapist had it not first been for life writing, for a reflective process, and for bearing witness to others in and around life writing. One must also consider that there is hardly a situation more fraught than coming to terms with sexual abuse. It is my practice, when teaching life writing, to explicitly encourage students that topic choices don’t have to equate to the *most* traumatic thing that ever happened (which is an unfortunate scenario teachers and students sometimes feel

backed into when approaching even a single personal essay). Instead, as a class, we use language such as *felt sense*, *urgency*, *relational witness*, *interiority*, to learn how to bear witness to what is most immediate right now, in the particular space in which the student finds themselves. Murray, of course, is not in a classroom in the scenario above. He is engaging one person one-to-one outside an academic space. The approach to life writing that I am forwarding, then, is as rhetorical as it is affective or vulnerable. Students learn to negotiate their content and *choice* of content in relation to a particular classroom, a particular writing assignment, and where they are in their lives at a particular moment. This approach often allows students to come to the decision of what they are not comfortable approaching in a classroom space, but it also allows them to witness the classroom space as relevant to their lives in ways that sometimes they've come to believe it isn't. In what is a funny wrinkle to the tired trope about life writing and teacher as not-therapist, a handful of times now, I've seen students use the life writing classroom to learn to trust others again, to trust themselves, to learn to write, reflect, and process, as a way of *getting beyond* the trust they lost from a bad experience *with* a therapist.

Whether it be difficulties with a therapist, with a parental figure, with a teacher, these breaches often create distance between a person and the social world around them. This distinction is rarely considered when it comes to Donald Murray and his unwillingness or inability to embrace composition's social turn (Thomas Stewart gets the closest I've seen to this in "Aloneness and the Complicated Selves of Donald M. Murray"). This aversion to certain social contexts is a reason why composition scholars need to actively be talking about a diversity of approaches in the classroom space. It can be true (and I've never seen it discussed, even in the glut of conversation surrounding James Berlin's claims of Murray as an expressivist) that Berlin is correct, in the world of theorizing movements, to place Murray as an expressivist based on his

selection of quotes concerning Murray (most damning, for Berlin, is Murray's claim that "the writer is on a search for himself. If he finds himself he will find an audience, because all of us have the same common core") (486) and yet, it can also be true that Berlin, in all his appreciation for the social contexts of our lives, never truly considers the social contexts that make a Donald Murray a Donald Murray. In other words, if Murray is guilty of a Universal claim regarding Truth, then, Berlin, quite ironically, may be guilty of a Universal representation of Murray's belief as a belief that just happens to be his [stubborn? misguided?] belief, not one in which a social dive into *why* might provide us with a much-needed understanding of how Murray has arrived at such a stance, how it is experiential rather than theoretical (perhaps, for someone writing to survive, to indirectly connect, writing might, at times, *feel* universal and boundary crossing), and why there may be many more students and teachers who understand the *felt sense* of Murray's statement even if they know it is not theoretically so.

Indeed, Murray's explicit commitment, without doubt, is to the writing process, his writing chair, and the person he meets there (himself), but Murray's reasons were not born overnight, nor were they born without a *lived* justification. And yet, there is a reason Murray doesn't convey this to Berlin and Berlin did not discover this of Murray. This reason, I believe, is because of the too-often, too-distant space we create between the genres of theory and life writing. While it is true that life writing can be inclusive of theory and theory of life writing, we have so often separated them to the point we couldn't speak across the genres if we needed to (and, as far as I can tell, we've desperately needed to).

It is not necessarily, then, in the strictest of Murray's composition work that we will find this evidence (though it's there in strands). It is this *affliction* from trauma, *affliction* towards the overtly social, and an *affiliation* for writing, for the imaginative, for an imaginal relational (or

indirect relational) that we in composition, if not the academy, have yet to take up in a serious manner. And it can all be found—*where else?*—in Murray’s vulnerable, life writing approach to his life and his writing.

Donald Murray: Exhibitionist

In “Queering Time and Space: Donald Murray as Introvert Whisperer,” I make clear what I will reiterate here: I am thankful for the contributions of James Berlin, as well as the theorizing and professionalizing of our field. Even Donald Murray, in a 1993 interview, “Mucking about in Language I Save My Soul,” states that “[t]he changes that have taken place in our discipline are inevitable. I knew what was going to happen, and I helped them happen” (118). Murray does state, however, that, even in helping to shape the field, he then felt excluded from it. As far as Murray’s response to the Berlin term that stuck—expressivism—Murray responds in typical Murray fashion, part-joke, part-deflection, part-pivot, with a thread of vulnerable truth running through it: “‘Expressivist’ is the term that seems to be used around here a lot. And I don’t know what ‘expressivist’ is, but I suppose the ‘v’ in there is somehow insulting. Now if I was called an ‘exhibitionist’ I could agree. I’ve been obscenely compelled to show my own writing methods” (123-124). Not only does Murray’s response reflect how different genres—made to oppose each other at the time—disrupt even an understanding for/of each other (Murray’s gesture at not knowing what the theoretical terminology used against him means), but it also demonstrates why Murray is still of benefit for those who privilege the experiential, surprise, and a high sensing life writing that exchanges vulnerability for self-and-societal discovery: that he was an ‘exhibitionist’ with the work and methods he provided.

Murray, not as theorist but as exhibitionist, becomes, for many and for many purposes, a *flight simulator* for not only how one might approach writing, but how and why, as we will approach now in Murray's life writing, some of us (including introverts and high sensing people) might construct a social and relational that arrives indirectly, *first* through the imaginative, through the reading and watching of story, through writing, through an uptake of the world that, it seems, is still woefully underdeveloped and misunderstood to this day.

High Sensing Life Writing as Flight Simulation for High Sensing People

In order to frame the *flight simulator* as a way to demonstrate the potential impact of Murray's high sensing life writing (his "Murrayesque-ness"), perhaps primarily on highly sensitive people, I borrow terminology from Jonathan Gottschall in *The Storytelling Animal*. In this text, Gottschall makes the claim that story helps us navigate life's complex social problems. While Gottschall uses a variety of genres (though focusing primarily in fiction) it is an argument that Gottschall makes in the middle of his book that brings out the idea of story as *flight simulation* for lived experience.

Gottschall's argument—that literature provides affective learning experiences before we attempt to live similar situations—begins with a comparison:

Navy fighter pilots have many difficult jobs. But perhaps the greatest challenge they face is landing a fifty-thousand-pound airplane—laden with jet fuel and high explosives—on a five-hundred-foot runway that is skimming across the ocean at up to thirty knots. The aircraft carrier is immense and powerful, but the ocean is more so, and the whole runway moves with the swell. The carrier deck is speckled with people and planes. The belly of the huge ship holds thousands of souls, a

terrible array of missiles and bombs, and a nuclear reactor. Navy pilots have to land on this thread of concrete in all kinds of weather and in the black of night. They have to do so without wrecking their planes, killing their shipmates, or causing a nuclear disaster. So before letting young aviators attempt actual landings, instructors strap them into flight simulators that provide much of the benefit of practicing landings, without the potential carnage and hellfire of the real thing. (56)

If one wonders why a comparison to lived experience begins with an analogy of jet fuel, high explosives, runways, oceans, missiles, bombs, thousands of souls, and simulation of carnage representing the hellfire of the real thing, one may not yet be ready to think about life writing, lived experience, trauma, and what all of that means, to all of us, but also, especially, to high sensing people.

The argument Gottschall is making, and with which I'd agree, is that story is, for our lived experiences, what flight simulation is for Navy pilots. Gottschall uses this metaphor to make the case that, while landing a jet on an aircraft is obviously difficult, "navigating the intricacies of human social life is more so, and the consequences of failure can be almost as dramatic" (56-57). These intricacies put forth by Gottschall focus both on a very literal, external relational ("[w]henver people come together in groups, they will potentially mate with one another, befriend one another, or fight one another") as well as on the emotional content of our lives (with Jane Burroway, Gottschall writes that "low-cost vicarious experience" is especially necessary for heightened "emotional experience") (56-58).

Heightened emotional experience is, of course, at the heart of this essay. This heightened emotional experience includes, but certainly isn't limited to, those who identify as high sensing

(thus, finding themselves easily overstimulated at an affective level), those who face traumatic childhood situations, or, too, those who embrace the “Murrayesque” in their composition, including either a disposition or stance towards surprise, life writing, autobiographical digressions, and an affective-relational approach to teacher-student exchanges. If, as this essay posits, a percentage of students and professors take up their experiences in a high sensing manner, from the creative to the imaginative, from a need for aloneness to potential overstimulation, then these students and professors, according to myself and Gottschall, need stories that represent what this way of being may look like, what it may entail, what the consequences may be, and how we might best negotiate these ways of being as human beings who wish to thrive, in our personal and academic lives, as well as hope to be able to be of service to the world around us.

Murray’s Narrative of Social Deception *Nuances* Affect Affiliation

If it is my argument that those living in affect affliction must find spaces that allow for affect affiliation, then it stands to reason that Murray, in response to the childhood he describes, must do the same. These spaces of reorientation can include time with a good therapist, of course, but they can, as easily, include time with a positive mentor or role model, time with a friend who loves and listens and bears witness, time in a classroom where we are witnessed, and, as it has yet to be sufficiently made clear in composition post social turn, in spaces alone, where we do what Gottschall suggests, including reading and watching story for the purpose of increasing what we know to be possible concerning a greater affective, intellectual, and lived capacity.

According to Murray's own accounts, he not only grew up in a home that was abusive, but it was also, even beyond the abuse, socially deceptive. This narrative of social deception, constructed by both of Murray's parents, made a young Donald Murray feel implicated within it. Writes Murray: "When father's pay would be garnished I would have to go to whatever department store kept him on the payroll and say he was sick and beg an illegal advance. To my shame, they knew—and knew I knew they knew—and gave me some folded bills" (18). This shame, along with a very sensitive uptake of the awareness of their knowing, had an impact on Murray's mentality, the narratives he believed, and his own embodied, affective sense of self in/with the world. (Even knowing this much, one might now predict that Murray is not going to be the leader of composition's social turn.) That these occurrences are not mere incidents but, instead, come to repeat themselves until they map onto Murray's narratives and sense of self, is demonstrated in Murray's telling a few pages later: "I will always be the boy hired at Miller's Market...seeing my mother's name on the bad debt, give-no-credit list [such that] [w]hen I went to get my first fifty-cent pay for a twelve-hour day [I] found my mother had charged against it, and I had to persuade Mr. Miller not to let my mother do that" (21). Between this and Murray's next account, he drops out of high school and though he actively seeks to correct the trajectory of his life, the narratives that follow him prove greater than his effort. Murray was able to negotiate a deal with a prep school and junior college that would allow him to get his high school diploma, as well as save half the \$1,200 tuition, room, and board by being a supervisor in the dormitory. Murray, needing nothing but to pay the \$600 that he had already saved, "went to take the \$600 from [his] savings account" but his mother had already taken all the money (134).

As we contemplate what the repetition of such behavior can mean for one's relationship to self and society, Murray makes clear that some of his narratives about his place in the world

had been cemented by first grade, when he had “already resolved not to be beholden, not to live a life of shame, of lies, of apology, of asking for an extension” (21). This is a powerful narrative to come to, but, even in this forward progression, it should be noted that a first grader trying to push the trajectory of his life in a positive manner is still not on the same playing field as a first grader who simply is projected that way, without the purposeful self-push. This is important to note, as Murray’s reliance on self and on self as writer is not predicated simply on habit, on disposition, or for emotional and affective purposes. Rather, writing would become the labor that attached to a work ethic that Murray was convinced he needed in order to escape a future where he either would not escape his parents or, worse, would replicate their behavior in the world.

It would be tempting to throw a theoretical bow on these assertions and call it a day, but what I seek to forward here, more than anything else, is how we need multi-faceted approaches in our teaching in order to approach the multi-faceted nature of lived experience in our classrooms. I have sought, with the space available, to cover the ways that Murray saw himself as a truer self when alone and more deceptive when wearing a social mask, as well as how he articulated this in his composition and life writing. There are also the ways Murray was taken up in the field (both by those who knew and supported him as well as his detractors).

But so much of the assessment of Murray has taken place over the years on the ground of theory, which is confusing, since Murray, above all else, did his work in and through the experiential. Murray’s work was experiential, in fact, to the point that, when pressed to discuss his theory in the aforementioned interview with *Writing on the Edge*, Murray says, “My theory starts with grains of sand: the daily writing. This illuminates and creates theory” (119). If Murray is positioned and positions himself in the doing, as a *practitioner* (a word Murray accepted but acknowledged was used to slight him), then an assessment of Murray should come from whether

or not Murray touched others, at an affective-relational level, making them, in turn, more able to take up writing and agency in their own lives. If Murray did, in fact, have this impact, experiential-to-experiential, and if some of this impact, from the so-called isolated writer, came without his knowing or meeting those he touched, then it stands to reason that we in composition need to broaden what it means to be social and relational, in a way that is inclusive of life writers, of introverts and high sensing people, of those who, more often than ever with today's technology, find ways to change lives without explicit social theories or even standing directly in a crowd of actual people.

Murray's Tribute as Call for Understanding an Indirect Relational

I didn't initially come to the Donald Murray tributes that follow in order to make an argument on behalf of Donald Murray. I came to them personally, years ago, as I tried to make sense of how a man I never met had so much impact on how I would negotiate my writerly and teacherly life, on how I might feel comfortable moving about in this profession, and on how and why I might be inclined towards the "Murrayesque" moves of life writing, surprise, and affective work with students.

The initial Murray tributes I found sound like someone *other* than the author who claimed to wear a social mask and who was accused of not being social enough in his work. Lad Tobin, in "An Appreciation," writes of a social-relational Donald Murray who would "draw people out, encourage them to talk and write about their passions, and then give them the perfect advice, encouragement, or opportunity to get started (546). Kathleen Dudden Rowlands, in a pre-death tribute titled, "Is It Something in the Water? The Persistent Influences of Donald Graves, Donald Murray, and Thomas Newkirk," writes: "What have I learned from these men? First, how to be a

teacher and how to live a teacher's life. Engage with students. Mentor. Be kind in my efforts to help students grow as readers and writers" (10). Continuing, Rowlands writes that she learned to resist the "voices that clamor for pedagogical sameness, scripting, and intellectual narrowing" (10). She realized that she was "teaching human beings first and subject matter second" (10). When it came to Murray, writes Roy Peter Clark, "[i]t was always life, then craft, then back to life" (Clark). Finally, in "Donald Murray Remembered," Susan Ahearn-Pierce writes that "I find that even three years after his death, I am still looking to Murray for advice" (2). These initial tributes, while focusing on Murray as teacher and life writer, focus equally, if not more, on the life of Donald Murray. Through these quotes, Murray is remembered as being able to draw people out and encourage them, to demonstrate a student-first approach that woke others to this pedagogical stance, and, in at least one account, was also seen as a relational giver of advice, not just in his life, but also in his death. In other words, even if Murray, at times, struggled to allow others to bear witness to him socially, he had no trouble, and seemingly no lack of willingness, to witness deeply into the lives of others.

If one seeks more testimonies about Murray, they will find a wide array. In 2006, a tribute site was established online, which allowed people to leave memories of Donald Murray and condolences to his family. These messages date back as early as December 31, 2006. Yet, in what speaks to the relational reach of Donald Murray, two people stopped by to leave messages as recently as 2015.

The first message in 2015 is simply an image of a candle. The second message, almost a full decade after Murray's passing, states, "Every time I sit down to write a poem or blog, draw a new map for an essay, or name a folder for a new manuscript, I pay tribute to Don" (Judith Ferrara).

It is this tribute aspect, this *still-living-life-writer-connected-to-life-writer-who-has-passed-through-life-writing-experience*, that makes me believe that, whether one be high sensing by temperament or not, to be a life writer is to dedicate oneself to crafting a highly sensitive lived experience. To be a life writer is to pay attention, close attention, to the words on the page and the words we use and hear, read and consider, in our lived experiences. To be a life writer is to pay attention, close attention, to what moves us, why, and what that might mean. To be a life writer is to allow oneself to hurt when we don't have to, to be open when we could be closed, to *reconsider* when it was difficult enough to *consider*.

And though so much life writing is done in isolation, it is anything but an isolated life. This, I believe, represents an *indirect relational* approach still begging to be better understood and represented in composition as well as Western culture. Because of life writing, people come to know us in ways we'd never allow, saving the fact that life writing demands we write what we'd never be willing to say. Life writing demands a kind of vulnerability that leaves traces of us on the page that even we have to go back and read—re-reading ourselves—in order to fully take up what we put down.

Without doubt, life writing connects us. Life writing is affective. Life writing is relational. And who can say how Donald Murray would react to all of this? A life dedicated, at least partly, to isolation, to detachment, and yet, in his passing, an outpouring of people, whether or not they had met him, not only feeling like they knew him but feeling this way because of the affective-relational connection from the work he did in isolation.

Perhaps, like the outpouring of letters he received post-heart attack, Murray would feel overwhelmed by it all. Perhaps wryly, he might say, “Fooled ‘em one more time, thanks to this social, public mask.” But I think the relational connection runs deeper than that. I think Murray

understood, in this regard, that a private, isolated Murray, *doing* life writing, could be more *relational*, more revealed and connected, than a traditionally social, “outgoing” Murray might ever be. This is an important point, as it demonstrates why we, in composition, must resist choosing between the theorist and the practitioner. Murray is choosing *the doing* here, but what he does will create theories to come. For instance, in choosing to write in a way that will move others, Murray is creating *flight simulation* for those who will read him. This is Gottschall’s theory, on display, decades before Gottschall will frame it. And lest we think Murray didn’t understand that story could be flight simulation, we should pay close attention to the *relational* work of story in Murray’s life as a child.

About being a child, sick, Murray writes, “I would stay in the car all day with my books, a notebook in which I could draw and write, and long hours where I could step through the pages of a book and become Long John and Robin Hood in Sherwood Forest, a patch-over-my-eye pirate, a clanking knight in King Arthur’s court. I was fortunate to be a sickly child” (63). Notice what happens when we turn experience to narrative. Aloneness, Murray might say, has the power to *create* greater lived experience. Further, I do not believe, had Murray been well, had he been surrounded by kids his age, that he would have been able to manifest Long John, Robin Hood, or Sherwood Forest. He would have felt stifled, and just the same, adult Donald Murray, had he always been surrounded by friends, by small talk, would never have been able to manifest the Long John’s, Robin Hood’s, and Sherwood Forest’s of adulthood: the articles, essays, and memoirs that so conveyed a life lived that people around the world believed they knew Murray as much as they knew the people in their very households.

This is why, when you read the online testimonies of Murray, just like the article tributes, you find people who testify of the relational, whether they ever met Murray or not. You read

David, who considered Murray “like a secret member of [his] family” (David McMaster). You read the account of an unnamed person from California who had “never gotten so sad at the news of someone [they] didn’t know [dying, as they had with Murray]” (Los Angeles, CA). You read JoJo, who writes that listening to Murray was like “listening to a wise Father,” before adding, “I never had one” (JoJo Medrano). You read Mary, who writes that, “Don was writing my story too” (Mary Lawrence) or Judy who “knew [Murray] through his weekly columns” (Judy Lynch). Roger tells us that “Don knew how to take his readers to [one of his favorite local hangouts] Bagelry and Youngs...” (Roger Parker). Michelle, far away, relays discovering Murray had passed: “I decided to take my lunch break just now and thought I’d get caught up on the past two weeks of Donald Murray’s column [from *The Boston Globe*]. When I saw Obituary connected to his name, I went still and my heart sank, much lunch left uneaten at my desk” (Michelle Morrill-Silvestri).

It becomes clear that if Murray wore a social mask, his life writing did not. It is without a doubt that, whether or not Murray practiced receiving at an affective-relational level, he was received at that level. It is without a doubt that, whether or not Murray viewed his public self as “true” or not, he was received as anything but deceptive. It is without a doubt that, whether or not Murray viewed himself as isolated, what he did in isolation became a beautifully profound, social, external, uptake that impacted the lives of hundreds, if not thousands.

Of course, in an affective-relational pedagogy, it’s not just about the witnesses. It is about the life of the one being witnessed. It is about the interdependence between writers, between witnesses, between life told and life lived. Even as I narrate this chapter, I cannot escape that interdependence. One final time, I put my affective-relational hat back on and try to speak into a

life that has passed already, the life of a man who, more than a decade after his death, keeps bearing witness deeply into my life, my identity, my present, my future.

Murray In My Classroom

I created the course, “Bearing Witness through Life Writing,” while I was a Ph.D. student taking a life writing class. In my final essay in that class, what I wrote became an open letter to the life writing students I would be teaching the next year.

That essay, now that I look back on it, had been building within me for the entirety of the half-decade I had been in graduate school. Like a well-behaved highly sensing individual, (perhaps like Murray in the “good boy’s mask”) (143), I’ve always known what people around me wanted, and I’ve always tried to give it, even if that meant growing up in an authoritarian religious church and finding, too often, a hint of that same authoritarianism in the academy. As example, even though I believed deeply in in-born temperament, and even though I wrote about it, I still spent most of my time in graduate school behaving as if every last bit of us is socially constructed. I grew up as an introvert, highly sensitive, someone who came up around abuse and trauma and escaped into his imagination. I know there can be times when interiority might be the greatest—and only—*positive* identity some of us have. Ask Murray, sometimes it can be the difference between surviving or not surviving. Yet, I still spent the majority of my academic time behaving as if everything we do, everything we are, begins and ends at the external. I’ve known the many reasons why I believe in construction + temperament, + disposition, but I also knew if I were to say them, I would be rebuked or ridiculed, so, mostly, I never said a word of what I believed.

But it was always different in the classroom, whether as an instructor to students or as a student in classes like life writing. These were the moments when I saw how far apart student need and desire is from much of academic publication and pedagogical claim. In the classroom, I've seen students gather, first as individuals, and work their way out. I've seen students cry, students stretch, students reach, all in aim for an identity that is within *and* without, desperately reaching—and rightly so—for a say in who they get to be, how they get to be, why they get to be.

In those spaces of affective-relational exchange, long before these experiences had a name, I came into an affect affiliation so strong that I was building a hunch without knowing it, building a hunch that I didn't know I was building until I sat down to write that final essay as a student in life writing.

Suddenly, when writing what became “Can I Be/Get a Witness: An Open Letter to the Life Writing Students I've Not Yet Met,” the entire essay, the entire course that I was designing, the path I had been taking for five years of my life, hinged on a hunch that hinged on an interdependence between interiority and the relational:

Part of my argument—a hunch that will live or die not by my claiming it but by how we uncover its applicability (or lack thereof) during our semester—is that there is a paradox to be found here, a paradox between the interior and the relational. This paradox, as I currently *hunch* it to be, is this: the more I approach the life stories of others with questions instead of answers, with permission instead of demands, with awe and wonder instead of insufferable know-it-all-ness, the more I will approach my own self, my own stories, and my own life with questions, permission, wonder and awe, and vice-versa. (Combs)

Thus far, this hunch has paid off wherever I've seen it in play. I've yet to meet a student who doesn't have an interiority, even if they don't know what the word means when they first enter the classroom space. I've yet to meet a student who, when they go home at night, doesn't have a narrative to wrestle with and against. It can be familial; it can be social-political; it can be deeper down in who they are than most of us are willing to admit is there. But every bit of the narrative they wrestle with and against, encapsulating everything mentioned above and more, has relational relatedness.

What life writing from an affective-relational standpoint seeks to do is to tell students they have a choice in the relational and, ultimately, they have a choice in the narratives they help develop, which will, in turn, help design the interiority in which they ultimately reside. What life writing does, what life writing from an affective-relational vantage point seeks to do, is to teach students that they have an interiority that is interdependent upon the relational aspects of their lives.

This flow of affective-relational exchange is such that it has the power to move from one person to another, and it can do so without a single word spoken between two people. Here, I've saved my favorite relational witness of Donald Murray for last. It's from Thomas Newkirk in his book *Embarrassment*, where the author ends a chapter dedicated to Donald Murray, not with wise words often quoted or words in secret between the two. No, Thomas Newkirk ends the chapter on a *look*:

But as I think about it, what I best recall is not any specific thing he said—it was the way he looked at me—as if he could see something I couldn't see. He took me seriously at a time when I didn't feel confident to take myself seriously, and he had confidence in me (on the basis of what?). He taught me to trust myself, and to

trust that if I paid attention to the words appearing on the page, they could lead the way. (189)

As this passage articulates, if we reflect upon what has been truly important in our lives, how and why we have arrived here to read the words in front of our faces, it will no doubt include somebody who “could see something [in us that we] couldn’t see.”

It doesn’t matter that Donald Murray passed in 2006, and that I came across him in 2013. Just as I wrote of Murray and Newkirk, the flow of the affective-relational can pass from one person to another, without a single word spoken between them. At five years old, I skipped my K-5 graduation because there was a word I couldn’t pronounce. I spent my childhood, like Murray, caught up in a mix of abusive environment, an off-putting social world, and a glorious and imaginative retreat from it all. I dropped out of high school and only made it to college because I could write the personal essay—I had the sensitivity, the traumatic background, and a desire to be otherwise left completely alone. But somewhere between living the first half of my life in isolation and living the entirety of my life just so, a professor put a Donald Murray reading in front of my face and the so-called isolated compositionist, through his high sensing life writing, began a process that led me to find a way—through teaching an affective relational life writing in composition—to bring forth the imaginative, the interiority, and the indirect relational, and make it present and prevalent in a social setting. When others speculated about Murray’s conferencing as too isolated, I saw the one-to-one connection of an introvert in practice, and, in five years of teaching, I’ve never conferenced with my students fewer than three times a semester. When others batted the “Murrayesque” back-and-forth as offensive or accurate to the times, I recognized through Murray a way of being/doing in the classroom that emphasizes surprise, discovery, vulnerability, and an unapologetic autobiographical that will always be as

relationally capable as it is thought to be isolated. And most of all, when I was so fearful that I would never articulate and theorize what it is that I am (highly sensitive? introverted?), and while seeking capital in our culture made me believe that until I could articulate and theorize what I am then I am really nothing at all, I woke up one day and realized I've already become, already am, what I sought to be all along. And this is how it happened as far as I can tell: I read and was moved by the words of a Donald Murray who lived from 1924 to 2006; I developed and fostered a relationship with an Imaginal Murray; from the relationship with that Imaginal Murray, I developed an Imaginal Me, who, over time, I now realize I've stepped into and become.

Like Murray, I am, first and foremost, a practitioner. I am a doer of the experiential. These days, when I stand in the classroom and tell my students I'm an introvert, they laugh in disbelief. When I tell them I am highly sensitive, they look at me sideways. Yet, none of this is due to my being any less introverted or highly sensitive. It is because, just as Murray found an indirect relational through his life writing, I have found an indirect relational through my life writing *classes*. In the classroom, I am social and relational, and I don't even recognize it. I don't recognize it because, in these classrooms, we build a kind of social and relational that theory has told us for thirty years cannot be: one that is not divided but is further captured and encapsulated by a room full of individual interiorities bearing witness to a collective imagination that makes me feel as if I have escaped into a favorite book.

And now, five years into teaching, when I consider Murray, I am no longer looking to him for help for myself. When I view Murray today, I see the 18-year-old undergraduate student that I teach or the 22-year-old Master's student I mentor. And because the image looks like them now, I can't help but reach out once more, if not for Murray, then for the aspects of Murray that look like the students I will continue to meet.

If Donald Murray were in my class, here is what I'd say to him. I'd tell him that, while I haven't lived his life, while his experience isn't mine, I've lived something like it. I'd tell him I admire what he has built—a narrative to sustain him when life circumstances seemed to want to take him places only tragedy knows. I'd celebrate his *indirect relational*, and I'd encourage that thinking, writing, way of being, at least for three-fourths of the semester's time.

But in that other one-fourth of the semester's time, because I believe we have to strengthen those external relations as well as our interiorities, our theories as well as lived experiences, I'd also challenge Murray like I'd challenge any student who I teach. I'd challenge him from an affective-relational standpoint.

“Don,” I'd like to say. “I have loved your uptakes all semester. I love the indirect relational you bring to this class. But one time, just one time, I'd like for you to write about the Donald Murray that those around you testify to, and I'd like for you to do so with the force and passion and beauty of voice that you save for your isolated self. Then, to take up the relational aspect of this course, I'd like to see you live your life, with full intention, for one week, as if everything you wrote about Don Murray from the perspective of your witnesses were the absolute truth on Don Murray. Then finally, we can do an uptake document. You can tell me how this all felt—to write, to live, to interact as you are seen—and we can have another conversation after that. And, finally, like every student who comes through the classroom door, I'd tell Murray what I tell them: you can ultimately take the narratives you want with you and you can leave behind the ones you do not want to claim. So, give yourself permission, in this 16-week-experience, to try on some potential narratives that are outside your normalized narrative attire.

The words I'd share with Donald Murray I share with anyone reading this essay. That, at the heart of an affective-relational pedagogy, is the belief that every life lived deserves the know how to negotiate their own narratives and interior reality. That, at its heart, an affective-relational pedagogy seeks to demonstrate to students, *with* students, that life can be more than a tragic narrative on-loop, trapped inside a restless or dulled interiority, to wrestle with or against. Life can be a narrative, negotiated relationally and through life writing, that opens up the interiority and allows for what most of us, I believe, truly seek: a narrative that we are not condemned to always wrestle with or against but, with time and know how, a narrative worthy of wrestling *for*.

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CHAPTER III: DEVELOPING AN AFFECTIVE-RELATIONAL PEDAGOGY:
TEACHING ADVANCED COMPOSITION AS BEARING WITNESS THROUGH
LIFE WRITING

Introduction

In my six years as a rhetoric and composition scholar, one of my approaches to scholarship has been an attempt to bring attention to pedagogy that involves both the external *and* internal realities of being human, without simply collapsing one into the other. It wasn't until I witnessed these ideas explicitly in the classroom space, however, that I became comfortable articulating their necessity in English Studies programs broadly. Fortunately, the opportunity to design and teach an Advanced Composition course happened in the fall of 2017. At this point in my scholarly and pedagogical development, I was teaching first-year composition and taking a life writing course at Illinois State University. Within that life writing course and beyond it, I set out on a one-year journey to study the potential opportunities and limitations if I were to teach Advanced Composition as what I was calling "Bearing Witness through Life Writing."

The article that follows focuses on the trajectory of this course, from design to in-class execution to student uptake documents, or the student-produced documents that demonstrate the student's process of taking up a new idea.² In this article, I highlight the fears I had concerning

² While this article strives to define terms as early as is possible and to associate those terms with the scholars who influenced them, there will be times when these rhetorical functions do not appear as early as readers may be accustomed. This is due to the fact that I seek to

the personal element of the course, especially in the lead up to teaching the course. In the sections, “Researching Trauma (The Experiential)” and “Researching Trauma (Skorczewski’s Case),” I focus on the potential pedagogical tensions between teaching, personal writing, and trauma in the classroom space. In the section that follows, “Terminology and Methodology,” I bring forth the vocabulary and theoretical frameworks that emerged from my time researching and preparing to teach the life writing course, including a focus on what I call affective-relational pedagogy, or what emerges at a felt-and-conceptual level when instructor and students prioritize bearing witness in and beyond the classroom space. In the four sections on the teaching of the

frontload narrative and lived experience as much as intellectualized scholarship. It is my hope to honor both the tradition of how we present scholarship in rhetoric and composition, *as well as* to demonstrate what teaching sometimes looks like for someone who may be more creative generalist than firmly-entrenched specialist. This difference may include introducing terms in a classroom based on a felt-sense moment or simply for their immediate pedagogical need. It may be, at times, only in publication that the creative generalist goes back to trace where this term that sprung forth on day 2 of week 3 originates from a scholarly viewpoint or which school of thought (whether known to that instructor or not) best represents the way the term was taken up. While we all bring our lived experiences and identities, along with premediated pedagogical approaches, into the classroom, an affective-relational pedagogy, being dialogical, strives to allow terms to originate and/or change meaning based on in-class conversation and based out of what a student may need or understand at that point of their lives to immediately continue their thinking, writing, and learning.

course, I use ontological dialogical pedagogy³, a teaching philosophy built on “students’ important existing or emergent life interests, concerns, questions and needs” to frame my life writing approach and student responses (Matusov and Miyazaki). Here my attention is specifically on how the ontological provides an “intrinsic value in itself” along with a “deep, bottomless, unfinalized understanding” (Matusov and Miyazaki). This ontological quality, spelled out more specifically in the section on “Terminology and Methodology,” demonstrates the process of learning and uptake used in a life writing course based around affective-relational pedagogy. During this process, I write briefly about each unit taught in that course, from letter writing to blended scholarship to podcast creations, and how these units were both unique *and* part of a continual, ongoing affective-relational process meant to take place in and out of the classroom, as well as during and beyond the semester. Finally, I close this chapter by reflecting back on the course, considering the benefits and constraints of teaching Advanced Composition

³ I use the term ontological dialogical pedagogy not as a philosophical treatment or deep dive into the nature of being, but because it is the term used in Eugene Matusov and Kiyotaka Miyazaki’s “Dialogue on Dialogical Pedagogy,” which, as will be illustrated later, provides the broadest and closest definition(s) for assessment and potential learning outcomes I’ve seen for affective-relational pedagogy. The authors in that article go on to debate terminology and philosophical stances in ways that are beyond the work of this article. For the purpose of this article, references to this pedagogy are a reflection of a teaching approach that considers all learning to take place, broadly speaking, in one of the many dialogical positions in which we might find ourselves (in dialogue with self, with real and imagined others, with texts, with our writing, with our instructor, etc.).

as “Bearing Witness through Life Writing,” while also presenting a call to action for those inclined to teach life writing in rhetoric and composition.

Researching Trauma (The Experiential)

While doing research on the theoretical basis for what would become “Bearing Witness through Life Writing,” I frontloaded two concerns about teaching the course: there are so few models of life writing from a rhetoric and composition standpoint, and research and theory in rhetoric and composition, at least from some scholars, warns about the potential reception one might receive for teaching a course that asks vulnerability and personal writing from the student population (Bishop; Richmond). Concerning the first point, when I chose to leave friends and family in North Carolina to move 1,000 miles to Illinois State University to pursue a Ph.D. in English Studies, I did so, in large part, because ISU has a professor, Amy Robillard, who teaches life writing. Prior to ISU, I had read an essay by Amy Robillard (“Shame and the Personal Essay”) and had found myself sitting in silence for up to thirty minutes after. I didn’t have the terminology back then to say it, but what had happened was I had been confronted by life writing, which had impacted me both at an intellectual *and* an affective, embodied level. This latter experience, being impacted at an affective, embodied level, can sometimes be rare in rhetoric and composition and in the academy at large, but I assert that it becomes a failing of the academy, of school in general, when the embodied, experiential becomes so far removed from the theoretical that, as Dee Fink asserts, we are causing students to see their “course files” and “life files” as out of sync—their course files only needed in the classroom and in prepping for a test, while their life files needed everywhere *but* in the classroom space (Fink 7). It is the goal of Fink, as well as myself, to see students sync “course file” to “life file,” and, for me, part of this

syncing happens only when students become convinced that what's happening in the classroom space is relevant enough, relational enough, embodied enough, to continue that learning within their lives beyond the classroom space. Is there an element of risk to this? Is there potential for difficult moments? Should any instructor who takes up this approach to pedagogy be aware of the potential risks and difficult moments? Absolutely. These realities must be acknowledged by anyone who takes their pedagogical responsibilities seriously, but it should also be recognized that there are risks and potential difficulties in *not* involving all of the student, in dictating to them or keeping the information so distant from who they are that nothing is ever risked or embodied in the classroom space.

It was with this mindset, while still a student in the life writing course with Amy Robillard, that I set out to understand what it takes to both teach a course that includes the personal, sometimes including the potentially traumatic, while also creating a space that can be safe, communal, relational, and affective.

Researching Trauma (Skorczewski's Case)

When it came to researching potential trauma in the classroom, the article that started me, stopped me, and ultimately started me (again) towards what became a theory-and-practice-based life writing course was Dawn Skorczewski's "From Confession to Testimony: Refiguring Trauma in the Classroom." This article first started me—piqued my interest—because the author lives the vulnerability of her pedagogy when she lays bare her shortcomings from the time she taught a 20th-Century Women Writers course, which included a unit on trauma and incest. At the conclusion of the semester, the author received a letter, not from a student, but from a student's therapist, which stated that Skorczewski's "approach to teaching texts about trauma was

misguided and potentially damaging to students” and that “her patient felt so agitated by the father-daughter incest poetry and [the] discussions of it that she could barely complete the course” (162). This information, of course, rocked Skorczewski and her pedagogical framework, so much that it would be ten years before Skorczewski would teach the material again.

I paused between pages. As a student in rhetoric and composition post-1980, I am familiar with the warnings about the risks of the personal in the classroom. I’ve read Kia Jane Richmond’s claim that “those who might opt to pay attention to emotions tend to be labeled instantaneously as expressivists, regardless of how emotions are related to their pedagogies or research” (70). I’ve also carefully read the push-pull of Wendy Bishop, how she spent a great deal of time and energy negotiating her place in rhetoric and composition, eventually wishing she had been more encouraged to focus on the affective, as she attempted to parse out the difference between therapy and the therapeutic, all, I’d argue, at the risk of her professional identity (see “Places to Stand” and “Writing Is/As Therapy”). Thus, with the fear of potentially doing damage to the students of English 246 combined with the fear of being (mis)labeled by my colleagues, I found myself especially cautious about approaching Advanced Composition with a life writing lens. It seemed, at first glance, reading Skorczewski, that even someone who taught life writing in the classroom was repenting of her choice.

But the Skorczewski article goes on and, thankfully, so does the author. In the ten years between teaching that course the first time and the next time, Skorczewski “[studied]...three years as an affiliate scholar at the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute” and “experimented with [the] use of personal experience in the classroom as a workshop facilitator at psychoanalytic institutes across the country” (165). She also “[wrote] a book about how moments of difficulty provide opportunities for teachers to rethink dynamics of power in the classroom, particularly when both

students and teachers can occupy the position of experts in relation to the material studied” (165). Skorczewski’s words, embodied best by the word *relation*, mirrored the pedagogical stance that I was coming to myself.⁴ My pedagogy, which I first called *the pedagogy of giving a shit* and now call an *affective-relational pedagogy*, centers on neither of the two binary choices we are sometimes given—individual/isolated or social/political. Instead, an affective-relational pedagogy is dialogical and posits that we are always in relation, both to the world beyond ourselves (our classmates, instructors, reading materials, friends, family, and greater social/political contexts) as well as to our interior lives (the conversations we have by ourselves, with ourselves, with imaginal others).

Here I will pause for a short treatment of where my work, particularly the affective-relational aspect of it, stands in relation to the composition field. Before I’d heard a single theory on affect or the relational, back in 2013, I *experienced* both through the felt writing and mentor commitments of Donald Murray and bell hooks. Whether it was the voice of hooks in *Teaching to Transgress* or of Murray in “Finding Your Own Voice: Teaching Writing in an Age of Dissent,” or whether it was hooks forwarding both her try-and-fail and try-and-succeed attempts with students, or Murray stating that a “[w]riter’s feelings control the environment in which the mind functions” (*Teaching the Other Self* 93), it was these two authors who convinced me of a kind of *experiential potential* long before I claimed a single term. My gratitude from there comes

⁴ See “Collaborative Witnessing of Survival During the Holocaust: An Exemplar of Relational Autoethnography” by Carolyn Ellis and “Interview With Carolyn Ellis: Autoethnography, Storytelling, and Life as Lived: A Conversation Between Marcin Kafar and Carolyn Ellis” for my scholarly influences on the relational as both method and writing style.

from reading scholars who grew out of the work of Donald Murray, scholars like Wendy Bishop and Thomas Newkirk, who were brave enough to claim Murray after parts of the field had fully caricatured the man, while also evolving their work with a progressing field, including far more explicit dives than Murray into the rhetorical awareness involved in all that we do.

The rhetoric and composition field has since burst forth with approaches on emotion. In fact, one of the leaders in giving emotion a prominent place in composition, Laura M. Micciche, writes that she has “been amazed to see (and unable to keep pace with) the staggering amount of composition research that elaborates on emotion as woven into a wide array of cultural and professional activities” (“Staying with Emotion”). Micciche states the importance of the rhetorical in the current movement on emotions—“that is, emotions do not simply exist but are *made* between people and in relation to objects” (“Staying with Emotion”). And there is that word, relation(al), again. I took up the word relational, first and foremost, because it was the best term for me, as far as being able to cover the widest spectrum, from individual in relation to the imaginal people we talk to throughout the day (and the influences of those “real life” relations), to the individual in relation to friends, family, society, to the student in relation to the text, their writing, their communities in-and-out of the classroom, and to the instructor. It has always been my contention that some of the pushback on Murray was necessary (Berlin, in “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class,” targeting Murray’s overly-individualized Capital-T Truth claims), but I also believe that three decades of moving so far into social and collectivist dialogue sometimes disallows the student from doing the work that is most urgent and expedient to her, in favor of simply doing what is passed down to her by the professor. In “Staying with Emotion,” Micciche references how “emotion’s stickiness (a concept indebted to Sara Ahmed) invites adaptations appropriate to a variety of research interests” (Micciche), and it was my

intention, in focusing on what emerged dialogically during the course on “Bearing Witness through Life Writing,” to search out language that was relational in its broadest terminology— language that would be inclusive of the individual and the societal, of the internal and the external natures of being human.

In attempting to produce a classroom space that accounts for both the external and internal, for both the narratives that have impacted us so far in life *and* the ones that will impact us by coming together as a class, I began to trouble the word affect with a potential that goes beyond emotion. In my time preparing to teach “Bearing Witness through Life Writing,” I began to separate emotion and affect by teaching emotion as having an *obvious* cultural, social, political referent, (when *how* we act/react is obvious to us because of the *why* behind it) whereas affect, while still entangled with who we are, is that not-yet-recognizable embodied, felt sense that emerges in present witness to whom or what or how we’re not used to seeing, hearing, discussing or witnessing.

In this way, affective-relational pedagogy, being dialogical, understands meaning-making as always through relational witnessing. Thus, in the classroom space, instructor and students are always contending with both the narratives they bring to the class (the emotional content) and the potential for change and/or emergent narrative work with a community of students (affective content). This idea of intentional relational witnessing demands that, even briefly, we do all that we can to *pause* the assumptions that come from our narrative positions in order to truly listen to the person speaking. In this way, instructor and students begin feeling tension as they move back-and-forth between the interiority and the external relational, as well as between narrativized-and-known emotional content and the emerging affective. An affective-relational pedagogy honors subtlety and nuance, making clear that these affective-relational changes, while

being initiated through reading life writing texts, peer work, or listening to peers in class, may initially take form through embodied promptings and felt senses that, if analyzed, may serve as a potential disruptor of the narrativized emotions and habitual thinking brought on through our usual cultural, social, and political scripts. Here the affective takes on what Hanne De Jaegher calls inter-affectivity or mutual affectivity, which concerns “the individual experience of being moved, changed by each other in social encounters” (Fantasia 2).

Knowing that each of us enters a classroom space with narrativized, socialized containers for our life experiences should suggest (far more than we have done so far), that, especially in a life writing class where we will be practicing vulnerability and writing evocatively, we will need new potential terminology, vocabularies, and containers for what we might take up in a 16-week space together. This is what Skorczewski discovered when she returned to teaching the content she had taught a decade prior. Now Skorczewski, instead of focusing strictly on lived experience, would frame the material in her course by theorizing about issues and by emphasizing listening. Here Skorczewski quotes Dori Laub, who writes of how we “[bear] witness to another by participating *in*—hearing, reading, opening up to—another’s testimony” (166). Through bearing witness, the situation becomes relational, as “the responsive witness can enable the trauma to exist for the speaker in a new way, in the world of another” and where “the exchange by the two partners can lead to a more meaningful elaboration of the events, one in which what gradually unfolds belongs to neither the speaker nor to the listener alone, but rather to both” (166). It was with this radical togetherness that I developed the terminology for my class: the affective, the interiority, the relational, bearing witness, each encapsulated under an affective-relational pedagogy.

Terminology and Methodology

Once I had accepted that I would be teaching Advanced Composition from a life writing lens and once I did the research to allow for a pedagogical confidence towards this approach, I did what many life writers would likely do: wrote my way to greater clarity. As my final project in Amy Robillard’s life writing class, I wrote an article titled, “Can I Be/Get a Witness: An Open Letter to the Life Writing Students I’ve Not Yet Met,” in which I outlined the major themes that we would engage with the following year in English 246. These themes, as mentioned, included bearing witness, affect, interiority, the relational. I will now highlight each of these terms, from the open letter that I wrote. Importantly, this letter also became a reading assignment for my life writing students on the first weekend of the Advanced Composition class. The students, in reading my letter, would then write a letter response to me about how they initially were taking up the terms that follow.

The first term I highlighted—bearing witness—has already been mentioned above through Skorczewski’s quoting of Dori Laub, who writes that bearing witness is a “participating *in*—hearing, reading, opening up to—another’s testimony” (166). In addition to that quote, I also brought in the voice of Leslie Jamison, in *The Empathy Exams*, writing that “when we do the relational with empathy, we ‘enter another person’s pain as [we’d] enter another country, through immigration and customs, border crossing by way of query: *What grows where you are? What are the laws? What animals graze there?*’” (“Can I” 2). It was with this definition of bearing witness that I offered a foundational hunch for the English 246 course, a hunch that brought together affect, interiority, and the relational:

Part of my argument—a hunch that will live or die not by my claiming it but by how we uncover its applicability (or lack thereof) during our semester—is that

there is a paradox to be found here, a paradox between the interior and the relational. This paradox, as I currently *hunch* it to be, is this: the more I approach the life stories of others with questions instead of answers, with permission instead of demands, with awe and wonder instead of insufferable know-it-all-ness, the more I will approach my own self, my own stories, and my own life with questions, permission, wonder and awe, and vice-versa. In other words, a goal of goals for me, for all of us, in this class, should be that we not only learn how to bear witness to others with empathy, inquiry, and respect, but to our own lives, learning that, sometimes, when we enter *our own lives*, we should enter as if we are immigrating, for just like we can drive a car on a familiar route without being conscious of even doing it, we may well find that the things we think are ours—life choices, opinions, attitudes, the trajectory of our lives—are actually habits and laws that grow, not of our own choosing, but from that of our parents, our school systems, our culture, our sometimes too-familiar paths. (Combs)

This passage, as much as any, gets to the core of what I call an affective-relational pedagogy. It not only covers what we've been cultured into—what was and is—but it explicitly addresses what, through bearing witness to affect, interiority, and the relational, we might become. In this regard, life writing becomes a pedagogical approach as capable as any of addressing what was before, what is now, and what might be still to come. Students of life writing experience this potential when they bear witness to the vulnerable, evocative writing of authors who do life writing (for our section of English 246, it was predominately memoirs such as Paul Kalanithi's *When Breath Becomes Air*, Edie Wadsworth's *All the Pretty Things*, Jesmyn Ward's *Men We Reaped*, as well as the podcast *S-Town*). Students in the English 246 course

experienced this potential as well when they bore witness to the vulnerable, evocative writing of their peers. In addition, they experienced this potential when they heard their own voices, their own stories and when their own voices and their own stories were heard by a classroom community that shared their vocabulary for affective-relational potential. In this way, we established, from the first week, a common language for this 16-week community, one where we would bear witness to affect (“that felt moment where you’re slightly disconnected from what you’ve known and almost plugged in to something new”), to interiority (perhaps, in an over-surveilled society, “the only place [remaining] where we can safely bear witness to the questions we’re not yet ready to ask, the words we’re not yet ready to say, the moves we’re not yet ready to make”), and to the relational (the voices of writers, of our peers, of our instructor, that can give us the diverse approaches and felt promptings that allow us the option to see the world anew) (Combs “Can I”). All of this, I wrote to my soon-to-be students, allows for an emergent composition rooted in life writing:

Thus, if you want to know what your instructor believes an English class should be, what it could be, if you want to know my hopes for the next sixteen weeks we spend together, it would be this: a composition that isn’t based solely on text, but on composing ourselves. A lasting, enduring, recurring potential to use the things we will discuss...to get at the ingredients of who we are, to get at what constitutes our mixture, and, if we see fit, stirring those ingredients in a way they’ve not been stirred before, adding to or taking away, as best human beings can.

While the belief then was already that the transformational would be our goal and that writing and witnessing were the vehicles towards that, it is only since teaching the course that I’ve discovered a framework in which I can comfortably place an affective-relational pedagogy,

and that is within ontological dialogic pedagogy. While, in the coming sections, I will focus predominately on the terminology laid out so far, I will use ontological dialogic pedagogy here as guide to what a course such as “Bearing Witness through Life Writing” is attempting to do.

Within the framework of ontological dialogic pedagogy, including an affective-relational pedagogy, each of the following, provided by Matusov and Miyazaki, is on the pedagogical table:

[T]he learning process has an intrinsic value in itself and can be viewed positively as pleasure; interesting challenge (including even frustration and pain); “curious wonder” (Taylor, 1968); deep, bottomless, unfinalized understanding; dialogic relationship with important others; growth; life itself; creativity; becoming somebody different; experiential; eventful (even at times through dramatic, painful, and tragic events); relational, valuing others; situational, ill-defined; immeasurable; not limited in time and space; unfinalized; and so on. (4)

I borrow from this passage on ontological dialogical pedagogy because, even as I continue to structure my own dialogic stances in an affective relational pedagogy, Matusov and Miyazaki are ahead of me in creating a vast, wonderful, specified list of assessment criteria that is applicable to the work I do in a life writing space but that I’ve yet to specify so clearly.

With such explicit and varying criteria in front of us in a life writing classroom, it was imperative that students have a way to track their growth, their learning, their narratives, their writing. This came through constant written uptake and reflection (as example, we created a shared Google Doc, called a “Witness List,” where each student added two quotes per reading, under their names, with an explanation as to why these quotes were most immediate, or impactful, in their

readings). With each of the major units documented below, students would also create uptake documents demonstrating new knowledge in conveyance with how their learning had transpired over time (Learning Outcomes for 101). Not only were these uptake documents as much a part of the assessment as the writing documents they had created, but it was also in these documents that students would reflect on the previous quotes that were most significant to them, as well as the narratives in their lives that they now saw as stronger or changing or in motion. It is the uptake documents, in their pedagogical purpose and the student responses within them, that most demonstrate the ontological dialogic vision of learning that must arrive out of “students’ important existing or emergent life interests, concerns, questions and needs” (Matusov and Miyazaki).

In the Advanced Composition course that follows, students learn to become better writers, but that is not the end of the story or simply the end goal. Through writing, through conversation in-class and out, through reading, writing, and turning in student uptake documents with each major unit, in existing in and with a shared language taken up communally and individually, the highest goal for this course remained the same: a pursuit of an ontological dialogic learning that carries intrinsic value in itself; that may involve pleasure and/or pain; that involves an ongoing, unfinalized understanding; that is, through relational witnessing, an education both one-and-the-same with living; that is dramatic, eventful, and full of surprises for both teacher and students. (Matusov and Miyazaki).

The First Four Weeks: Terminology, Tears, and Testimony

I’ve spent a majority of this article, thus far, emphasizing affective-relational pedagogy, a shared vocabulary, and an ontological dialogic methodology, because, in the totality of the

semester, I do believe this combination was the most instrumental factor in creating what became the most successful student community I've taught (inside the classroom space and, according to the students, beyond it). This process began in the first weekend when, as noted, students read my open letter and wrote a letter response. In this initial act, I received more than sample writing from students. With their letter responses to mine, we had entered the dialogic, and the narrativized emotions that students entered the 16 weeks with (as well as my own) were now pitted with and against the terms and experiences we would wrestle with for the remainder of the semester.

This initial assignment called forth the potentials for pleasure and pain, as students realized this would be a course more explicitly personal/relational than many they had taken. Many of the student responses at this juncture in the semester can be summed up in the words of one student, Heather Davies, who immediately recognized the need for the affective, as well as the pleasure and pain of trying to translate it:

By the third class alone, I find that your lessons on life writing have begun to impact me in a way I had only dreamed a college course would. I realize that I feel a stir inside of me every time I consider your words on connecting and our basic human need to do so. And it dawns on me that the term 'affect' is playing its role.... My biggest setback? When I feel something so deep and worth translating, I find that I lack the words and methods to create anything with it. I struggle to take those thoughts and feelings and turn them into anything more than the overwhelming feeling in my chest. And then the frustration sets in. And then I give up. I am deeply convinced that this course will reawaken those feelings. I believe that life writing will teach me to bear witness to my own life. I

am so excited. And I am also scared....

Having now taught this course twice (I had the opportunity to teach it again in the fall of 2018), I can say that one of the most consistent themes I see with undergraduate students is this struggle with critical awareness and what to do with it. Students have been taught, in classes, in society, in social media, how to be critical. They can articulate the worst in others and themselves, with the ability to deconstruct as well, but the majority of the students who come into my classes don't seem to know how to construct something in the place of what has been torn down. With the student comment above, all of life becomes an overwhelming feeling in the chest, but what they often lack is the ability, with a group of people, to translate, rearticulate, and reconstruct something out of this awareness and pain. Short of being able to *do* something, this awareness takes the form of narratives in their lives, and these narratives become stuck, habitual, ever 'inside' them, ever in front of them, ever *as* them. An affective-relational pedagogy, urging the emergent through ontological dialogic pedagogy, recognizes that the urgency must come from each of us, and life writing, an ability to put those thoughts, fears, and narratives on the page and do something with them, becomes the broader, long-term approach to identifying current narratives in our lives and, potentially, doing work on them or moving beyond them.

In the initial weeks of the semester, this fear in students often evolves into excitement when two things happen: when they truly experience a classroom space of shared terminology and witnesses and as they begin to gain an ability to shift these already-existing narratives, to stand up to them, to write them out, to bear witness to them, to dialogue about them. These two moves, combined, seem to bring motion and action and opportunity into the lives of the students I've taught. And this motion, action, and opportunity, as mentioned, seems to spring forth when students begin to bear witness, speaking internal narratives that are not always easy to share, to

each other in the classroom space.

All of this potential—these fearful-but-excited moves to readiness—were needed, when, in week four, while doing our first “Around the Room” exercise, where students come to the front of the room to discuss what they plan to write about in Unit 1 and why, the first of what would be between 4-6 students, cried as they attempted to talk about a topic of their choosing. The first student who cried did so while talking about being bullied throughout school and how it turned her into something of a bully, to her own self, if not others.

Another student, one who had a strong Christian faith, began to cry when she admitted that her father had been such a destructive force in her life that she couldn’t even conceptualize a relationship with a God that takes on the role of “Father.” With both of these situations, I initially sat tense. This was the first course I had designed, and it was the first time students cried in my classroom. Yet, in both situations, I was only a small part of the dialoguing that happened during and after the tears.

In the latter situation, concerning faith and fathers, before I could speak, two of the students in the class spoke. Both students who spoke self-identify as atheists, and both said they couldn’t understand the religious aspect of what they had witnessed, but they said they had been listening to her stories and they understood the part about fathers. In that classroom space, I watched as two atheist life writers nursed a religious life writer a little closer to her faith, her story, and the next essay she would write. As I watched this act of witness, I couldn’t help but wonder in what spaces these conversations are even happening, let alone with that mix of boundary crossing, boundary preservation, and compassion.

In the case of the first student who cried, the one who talked about being bullied, she admitted to not having friends in college, to having never made a single friendship while in

college. The next week, when we had one-on-one conferences, as I walked to the location, I saw this student, who had no friends in college, sitting on a bench with another student from the class, one she had known her entire time at ISU but had never befriended. They told me they talked for 45 minutes that day.

Student uptake documents for Unit 1, written some two weeks after these events, indicate that students remembered these moments, not as much for the tears as the bearing witness. One student, Kevin Dixon, wrote “When we were sharing our ideas, I realized that there are others besides me who have their own things to deal with, and like me, you couldn’t tell at a glance....When we shared our ideas, I felt that we all connected to each other, if only for a short time” (Dixon). Brittany Hoffman wrote about bearing witness, about listening: “I was able to feel empathetic towards other people...without having...to put my own...advice into their lives. I was able to listen and cry with them or laugh with them...as they were experiencing or re-experiencing their lives with our class that day” (Hoffman). Concerning the affective part of the relational, Abby Wagner wrote, “I felt myself not only caught up in the vulnerability many students showed...but I was also caught up in the atmosphere of the room. Not only were the students in front of the class showing emotion, ones who were seated and listening were showing emotion as well. It was an outpouring of support and of students bearing witness to one another. It made me feel very safe when my turn came to sit in front of the class” (Wagner).

These responses, while encouraging when it comes to how students were taking up bearing witness, came from the students who *had not* cried. In one-on-one conferences, I asked each student who had cried if they would rather have not cried but also not received the benefits they had written about in their uptake documents (connection, release, better understanding of urgency and affect in their writing). Each said, without hesitation, they’d have it happen the same

way.

These first four weeks, building a language together, bearing witness to each other (which included reading a short article from Parker Palmer about how not to be a *smothering* witness), beginning to read and deep-dive into *When Breath Becomes Air*, as well as watching how the students took up the call to bear witness to texts, to each other, to themselves, put away any fear I had in the year-long run up to teaching this course.

The 18 students in this Advanced Composition course—English education majors, English studies majors, and one English minor—had been in classes together throughout their undergraduate careers, yet they soon admitted they had never reached out to the majority of the people in the room, had made assumptions about each other that lasted for years, and were now seeing those assumptions fall away by the day and week. As the semester progressed, I began to realize this was more than a space that could benefit students. It was a space that students had been starving to share with one another.

Unit 1: The Conflict Letter

Every class I've taught for the last five years begins in conflict. Usually, with what I call a conflict letter. This assignment was designed because I wanted to teach students how to find urgency and immediacy in their writing and topic choices, and I've found the best way into urgency and immediacy is in exploring an unresolved conflict in one's life. The conflict letter not only allows students to bring elements of the personal essay into letter writing (examples we use in class include Rafael Gamero's "A Cruelty Undeserved: My Apology to Limpo" and Sullivan Ballou's Civil War letter), but it also requires that students choose who the letter recipient would be, a decision that can have profound implications on writing and narrative work. What I have

seen in five years of teaching the conflict letter is that students knowing they do not have to send the letter in no way reduces what they take up from choosing a recipient. For my first four years teaching the conflict letter, I knew this simply on an experiential level. More recently, I've been able to put scholarly context to what is happening when students have their writing, their narratives, and their thinking altered by the choice of a particular recipient, despite the fact they know the recipient will never read what they write. In "Opposites in a Dialogical Self: Constructs as Characters," Hubert Hermans writes:

In an extensive discussion of the role of 'invisible guests' in the self, Watkins (1986) argued that in most psychological theories, imaginal phenomena are most often approached from the perspective of the real. Ontological priority is clearly given to the existence of the real others and to 'reality' in general, whereas imaginal others are typically seen as derivative from and subordinate to this 'objective' reality. Nevertheless, our daily lives are filled with imaginal dialogues. Taking place alongside actual dialogues with real others and interwoven with them, they constitute a central part of our narrative construction. (7)

This tendency to privilege the external, the material world, and relegate these imaginal narrative constructions makes it difficult to talk about the imaginal without fear of how we will be perceived. One might argue that it is this lack of conversation around the imaginal narrative constructions, more than writing 'the personal,' that, at first, makes it difficult to have these conversations and do this kind of work in a classroom space. Yet, often, the most powerful writing I see in this unit, as well as the work that most profoundly impacts the student writers, is not the conflicts current and 'real' ("my roommate and I don't get along") but it's the conversations with imaginal others who may or may not still be in our lives, the ones that

demonstrate that what once began in the external has long since moved partially or solely to an interior stage, where patterns play out and identities are formed and reformed, not always by consistent characters in our material world, but by the imaginal narratives that speak to us, at us, and through us over and over again.

Unit 1, like the units that follow, sought to bring out an array of sensitivities in the student writers. These sensitivities include moving back-and-forth between the interior (the self-portraiture) and the relational (choosing a letter recipient). These sensitivities also include topic choice (students were to choose a conflict that is unresolved in their lives) and a sensitivity for doing personal writing (using qualities of the essay to write the letter).

Regarding the fifteen students whose work was analyzed, five students wrote to friends or former friends, four wrote to family members, three wrote to people from their lives who have passed away, two wrote to teachers who had negative impacts on their lives, and one student wrote his letter to the “toxic” portion of himself.

The two aspects that stood out most to me were seeing some students, in the aftermath of writing their letters, adjusting their self-narratives in a positive way, along with a trend I see often: a handful of students writing letters to those who have passed away. Both of these circumstances highlight what I often see from undergraduate students who come into my class: wrestling with a static narrative that needs to be put back into motion, needs to be updated.

All of these qualities are captured in Kayla Warner’s letter, which she wrote to her Nana, who had passed away seven years prior. The letter, like so many of them, is a mixture of scene, physical detail, reflection, and uptake. For scene and detail, Warner writes “Living a backyard from you was like a fairytale. I’d come home from school, drop my backpack on the living room floor, and run over to your house. You and Papa would be sitting in the sunroom with Judge Judy

on the television....When it was just you and me, we'd speak in our own language, Kayla-Nana Language" (Warner). Now, I'm not sure how many of us would connect Judge Judy to our fairytale, but this passage demonstrates how stuck Warner remains in a narrative almost ten years old. With her Nana, she connected. With her Nana, she was seen and understood. With her Nana, she trusted another person. But, from her first paragraph, five paragraphs before the one quoted, we understand that this is not the case for twenty-year-old Warner. To start the essay, Warner writes, "I often find myself alone. I usually hide away in my bedroom with the door closed to uphold the feeling of isolation or listen to music on my way to class to avoid brief conversations with people I know. I spend my days on a computer writing about fantasy worlds rather than the world I live in. It's easier that way, I think" (Warner). One might imagine that Warner's struggles at twenty would have little-to-nothing to do with losing her Nana at thirteen. Warner herself may have thought that coming into the conflict letter, but one thing I've seen, again and again, is that once we start writing our narratives, tracing them, what we find is so often more complicated than what we might have imagined we were looking for. Warner not only lost her Nana when she was thirteen, she lost her Nana on her thirteenth birthday: "You left me on what was supposed to be a happy day—my thirteenth birthday. We sat there, waiting, knowing, some of us crying. I held my cousin Brian as tears filled his eyes, but for some reason I couldn't cry. I couldn't accept this was happening; not today, not ever" (Warner).

Warner describes a spiral from there, from losing her Nana to changing schools to failed friendships to no longer trying. She writes that "losing you started a ripple effect that extended far beyond what I was capable of handling." Warner also indicates that there were times where these issues might have been worked through, if she could consult her Nana. This idea of consulting her Nana seems more than a simple "if you were alive," but, rather, if she could have

at least consulted an imaginal version of her Nana. Yet, writes Warner, “I avoid thinking of you so I don’t have to lose you again.”

I recall Warner’s account and focus on it here because of the level of uptake I saw from her after this letter. As the semester continued, Warner no longer wore earbuds to class. I witnessed her befriending students in the class. In a later one-on-one conference, Warner dropped an old journal in front of me on the table. “It was my Nana’s journal,” she told me. “She stopped writing in it halfway through. I’m going to start writing where she left off.”

These are moments of uptake that go beyond words on a page. They are material and embodied and full of motion. They are the result of wrestling with static narratives, of attempting to update outdated narratives, of trying to merge contemplation with action. They are movements I see from many of the students after the conflict letter, and that motion, that evidence that students are capable of doing this work and seeing results, is often a positive force in their buying in and continuing on throughout the semester.

Unit 2: Blended Scholarship

If the first few weeks of the semester built a community around shared terminology and respect for one another, and the first unit opened up student awareness to deeper relational theories, the goal of Unit 2 was to build upon the personal writing, the sensitivities to urgency, immediacy, and conflict, and to mix these elements with more traditional rhetorical academic moves that might be found in works such as expository writing.

Amy Robillard and I call this mix of personal and academic *blended scholarship*. In *How Stories Teach Us*, Amy and I define that final term as follows: “Blended scholarship combines the self-reflexive, self-analytical, culturally aware analysis of the stories we tell ourselves with

the moves of good scholarship: tackling an issue from multiple perspectives, theorizing potential reasons for and responses to difficult issues, and working toward insights that may prove helpful to others in different contexts” (3).

If the goal of the blended scholarship essay in “Bearing Witness through Life Writing” was to write about a topic that demonstrated the interconnectedness of scholarship and the self, with affect serving as that embodied moment where we choose our topic, and the relational as the recognition of the importance of the topic in our lives and beyond it, then one of the essays that came together most completely was that of Candace Sutton. Sutton, who identifies as transgender, in an uptake document after the unit, marks the moment they knew what their topic would be. This moment came when Sutton was on campus, but also on *Facebook*, taking in a post from their mom in the midst of an urgent moment, not yet spoken about in class, where Sutton worried about their reception as a nonbinary person in the coming year when they would begin the student-teaching process in their education training:

A week or so ago, my mom tagged me in a Facebook post, a poem that my favorite spoken word poet had just released. In the post she stated how she loved me for who I was and was proud of me. Upon listening to the poem, I began crying in the middle of a computer lab on campus. It was about what it’s like living as a person of the trans community. This held such an affective response to me due to the fact that often times my mom never engages with my gender identity in a serious manner...I didn’t think I would find a moment to discuss my gender in this class, or even for the rest of my academic career. In this time leading up to student teaching, I am so acutely aware of how my identity may impact the start of my career, and it is terrifying. But also so completely unfair. I

think I have come to a point though where I am starting to care less about the hardship that may occur in the process of living an open and authentic life, because I would take that hard life if it meant changing the narrative of trans people for so many students.

This affective moment from Sutton, powerful and clear-eyed, defies preconceived notions about what a course like “Bearing Witness through Life Writing” might produce. Yes, there were tears in the moment Sutton received the poem from their mom; yes, these tears were brought into the Advanced Composition course through the uptake document; yes, the choice was made to connect that moment to choice of topic for the blended essay, but those tears in no way produced any of the more stereotypical responses we sometimes hear around life writing: a want or need for pity, for therapy, for self-indulgent work. Rather, those tears began *outside* the life writing course, but—it’s important to note—they existed, on campus, with or without the course. I mention this specifically, because, while I hear a lot of talk about how life writing might produce emotional content that might be difficult for students, I don’t hear talk about how students are *already* having these emotional moments, on-and-off campus, nor do I often hear discussion on how the *lack* of classroom space to bring these elements in might be detrimental for student growth and development. In the scenario with Sutton, it’s not the life writing course that created these emotions. Instead, Sutton, like so many students I teach, was already having the moments of fear, of wonder, of worry. This fear was not compounded by the life writing space, however, but by the *lack* of spaces like life writing. Writes Sutton, “I didn’t think I would find a moment to discuss my gender in this class, or even for the rest of my academic career” (Sutton).

Sutton did find a place, however. Through life writing and blended scholarship, Sutton *co-created* a place, and the excerpts that follow demonstrate the work that can be done by

blended scholarship, especially when it's touched by the urgency of the moment and the writer's knowledge of that urgency.

In the blended scholarship essay, Sutton brings in writing from other members of the trans community, who discuss the difficulties of potentially being outed at any juncture and, also, of being asked to serve as experts concerning the trans community. These issues, brought up and discussed through the writing of others, are important. What takes blended scholarship, as well as Sutton's work, to the next level, is the storytelling from Sutton's own experiences.

With a paragraph break, we leave the accounts brought into Sutton's work, and we find ourselves in a room with "desks...formed in the oblong half-attempt of a circle" (Sutton). The only sound is the buzzing of fluorescent lights and the visuals are limited to "[p]artially formed thought and ideas...scrawled on the whiteboard" as "the only splash of color adorning the bland walls" (Sutton). The teacher moves around the room, listening to project ideas, Sutton taps their fingers, excited to bring up their topic on "Vonnegut's work and how through modern analysis it becomes less of a critique of socialism and more of a critique of capitalism" (Sutton). Sutton won't get to give that spiel, however, at least not in the neat and excited way planned, as the teacher will speak before Sutton, speak for Sutton: "Oh, you're doing something in regards to queer theory, right?"

When Sutton responds with "no," they are met with, "Really?" (Sutton).

The power of these stories continues without announcement. They don't have to announce themselves in blended scholarship. They weave in and out of the essay, surrounded by outside voices that strengthen the argument and demonstrate the reach of the problem.

When the stories continue, it's "a different classroom, different faces, and a different town" (Sutton). Sutton is giving a report, but they don't get more than a minute in. Writes

Sutton, “I’m holding the book my partner gave me....I start explaining the meaning it has for me, the hope it carries that I continue to live my life through an explorative wonder” (Sutton).

““What do you mean by ‘them’?”” the teacher interrupts.

The purpose of the presentation is over and what ensues is a conversation between the teacher and Sutton on pronoun choices. In the essay, Sutton weaves this story with reports of difficulties in the trans community, whether it’s being targeted or fired for being transgender, being bullied, or being on the receiving end of well-meaning academics placing the expert knowledge of the community on each person who identifies as transgender.

Sutton uses a range of stories—outside sources and their own—to demonstrate how small the academy can sometimes feel for a trans person, and just as the reader processes these realities, Sutton is met with a similar, but more frightening version of these accounts, when they are approached by a stranger at the bus stop.

“Hey, are you one of those transgenders?”

The questions only get more uncomfortable, as Sutton continually answers with only one response, “I am under no obligation to answer that question” (Sutton). As the world, within the academy and outside of it, gets smaller and smaller, we breathe a sigh of relief when the bus takes Sutton away. Yet, even as the bus takes Sutton away, with the allowances of life writing, of bearing witness, of the relational and the interior, it is not difficult to see the many narratives and realities Sutton has *not* escaped. Sutton will begin teaching in a year, and every outside source is a warning of what might happen and every story from Sutton is evidence that none of it is farfetched.

Sutton makes their resolve, however, in the uptake, writing, “I think I have come to a point though where I am starting to care less about the hardship that may occur in the process of

living an open and authentic life, because I would take that hard life if it meant changing the narrative of trans people for so many students” (Sutton).

Sutton’s resolve was evidenced to me, when, one year later, I received an email from Sutton asking for the citation of an article that I had written with a former student, “In Search of Affect Affiliation: Mistakes, Missteps, and Mentor Relationships.” Sutton was continuing the project that they started in the blended scholarship essay, wanting their message to reach a bigger audience, their urgency no doubt only more immediate since we had last spoke.

Sutton wouldn’t be the only student continuing their work from that unit of the course. A year later, I ran into a student from that class, Mandy, who approached me excitedly. In the life writing course, Mandy revealed that she had always wanted to write a play but had not been permitted in former creative writing spaces. For the blended scholarship essay, I allowed her to write a play, as long as it met the criteria of Unit 2. Now, a year later, Mandy was taking her first course on playwriting, was considering moving in that direction officially, and wanted me to know of this continuation the moment she saw me.

This is the strength of life writing, of syncing “course files” and “life files,” of blending personal and academic. So often the work began in the classroom space reaches beyond it. Often this very work begins initially by looking back, through reflection, but it ultimately reaches forward, to areas and arenas of student lives beyond the classroom space and beyond the 16-week semester.

Unit 3: Life Writing as Podcasting

In Unit 3, instead of memoirs, personal essays, or theory for homework, I assigned the podcast *S-Town*. *S-Town*, according to Wikipedia, is “an investigative journalism podcast hosted

by Brian Reed and created by the producers of *Serial* and *This American Life*. All seven chapters were released on March 28, 2017. The podcast was downloaded a record-breaking 10 million times in four days, and it had been downloaded over 40 million times by May of 2017 (Wikipedia).” At the heart of *S-Town* is John B. McLemore. McLemore, an antiquarian horologist, speaks better for himself than I could speak for him, and I’d encourage the reader to learn more about him at their earliest convenience.

At this juncture in the semester, I was so proud of the community the students had built and the work they had done together, that I took myself out of the majority of the discussions on *S-Town*. Different groups would be assigned to lead the conversations on different episodes of *S-Town*. The conversations were engaging, and I was most proud that the discussions lasted for the majority of the class time. For my part, I would note parts of the conversation I found particularly intriguing (as well as layers and nuances that I felt needed to be added to the conversation), and I would join in towards the end of class and bring these notes into the discussion. Not only did I want to include this unit in order to make clear that there are genres of life writing that do not end with *writing*, but I also wanted students who may learn better listening to a podcast to have that opportunity. (Of particular interest, though this unit was towards the end of the semester, one student noted that she hadn’t truly understood the meaning of affect until she heard it in the voices and subsequent actions of Tyler Goodson and John B. McLemore, two of the lead personalities in *S-Town*.)

For their Unit 3 deliverables, the English 246 students, who had previously used the concepts of an affective-relational pedagogy, of bearing witness to the relational, interiority, and affect, in order to explore their own lives and, in Unit 2, to explore a greater societal narrative, now became teachers of sort, entering into the dialogical with friends and family on what would

be their own podcasts. On these recorded episodes, students guided their friends/family/podcast guest through conversations similar to the ones we had in class, using the lenses of the classroom terminology to explore the lives of their friends/family/podcast guest or the relationships they held with their friends/family/podcast guest.

One of the podcast examples that still surprises me, over a year later, is one where a student, Persephone Allee, who had written about her difficult relationship with her mom in Unit 2, chose to interview her mom in the Unit 3 podcast. Of the 18 students in the course, I'm not sure anyone took up the terms on the affective-relational and bearing witness more earnestly than Allee. (I received reports during the semester that, in classes that had nothing explicitly to do with this subject matter, Allee would ask questions such as, "What might happen if we were to bear witness to this situation?") In her podcast for class, which she titled "My Mother: The Dragon," Allee shares this excerpt:

Mom: I [know] some people may think I'm standoffish a little bit.

Me: Is that not who you are?

Mom: I don't know if I am so much standoffish as the fact that I just definitely, I am fully an introvert. I keep to myself. I don't share much with people. I... my life is personal and private and nobody else's business... I don't know, I don't know if people, I am sure people have common misconceptions about me, but I don't know what they are and then again the other side of that is I don't really care. I mean it sounds bad, but I really don't. I don't care what people think about me and I don't think about what other people think about me in general. I don't know, I mean I am who I am. Take it or leave it. So, I guess I am a little standoffish, I don't know.

I am most impressed with how Allee allowed her mother to speak. Allee had written previously about her mother, who had attempted to take her own life several times while Allee was growing up. Allee reported, at times, being afraid when her mother would say goodbye before school, never sure in which context to take the farewell. There were times when her mother's unhappiness was turned towards her, but, now away for college, she felt the need to try to understand this relationship new and differently.

In the pre-interview, narrative portion of the podcast recorded, Allee gives shape and context to her mother, at least as she now sees her:

The Dragon lives alone by choice. History has taught the Dragon that others cannot be trusted....The Dragon's existence is a solitary existence, one where few are welcome, one borne out of pain and suffering. To survive is to defend, an exhausting practice where vulnerability can mean death. The Dragon's only opportunity to rest is in the sanctity of its own home. Any who attempt to trespass will encounter the Dragon's wrath: a tenacious barrage of elemental fury; a merciless slash against any within range; a caustic tongue for all within earshot....Cunning and proud, the Dragon will never bow to anyone. It is prepared to fight to the death to preserve its independence and protect its values....The Dragon, tired from fighting, just wants to be left alone....[The Dragon] has long-since decided that relationships are unworthy of its time. After years spent fighting, the Dragon craves the peace that solitude may bring. My mother, the Dragon, is a fearsome opponent, and I am one of few who have glimpsed the beating heart beneath the hardened scales.

Here I want to write that I don't believe I could have been, as an undergraduate, sophisticated enough to listen and attempt to understand at the level Allee does. The truth is, however, I'm also not sure I could do so in my life *even now*. It is the terminology and practice of bearing witness that allows this. Allee makes this clear, along with other important insights, as she writes her uptake for Unit 3:

To be honest, [interviewing my mother] wasn't much of a choice. In recent years, the tenacity of my relationship with my mother has grown immensely, and I wanted to take this opportunity to deepen the bond we already share. While I had heard many of the things she had said before, I had never taken the time to listen as intently and honestly as I did for this assignment. In my past, I know I was guilty of making assumptions that I wanted to be true of my mother, good or bad depending on my mood. The ephemeral nature of my previous understanding was insufficient for the relationship I want to have with my mother, so I did my best to listen with an intent to understand. I asked questions instead of proposed answers. I allowed for silence instead of filling the void.

There is a culmination of understanding that is taking place in this uptake. Most, if not all students, have some level of this uptake by the end of the semester. With students such as Allee, it might be a host of terms better understood, better practiced. With others, they may have taken to affect, or the relational, or the interior, and most of their uptake focuses on a single term, or a couple of terms. Regardless, most students leave with terminology and categories that allow them to take up their writing, their relationships, and their lives differently than when they entered the classroom 16 weeks prior.

Conclusion

In the last two years, I've had the opportunity to speak about my "Bearing Witness to Life Writing" course and the theory that goes along with it (once at a creative writing conference and once at a summit for those preparing to teach writing program courses at Illinois State University). I am finding that what is most needed, when it comes to life writing and the personal, is what I've been discussing for the entirety of this paper: a dialogue.

In the Q&A at the summit, one instructor raised his hand and cautioned the room. "If you're considering teaching this kind of material, picture yourself in your office with your student and the student begins to cry. Is that emotional labor you want or can handle?" I found myself, listening, in complete agreement with this instructor. Not everyone is meant to teach Advanced Composition as life writing. That is and always has been okay. But, in reverse, we have to be careful not to make our spaces in English, particularly rhetoric and composition, void of the opportunity to teach life writing for those who *would* take up these literacies, approaches, and opportunities.

For Skorczewski, to be able to effectively teach such a course, it took moving away from a too-raw personal, in order to bring in more attention to the rhetorical and theoretical. As this article demonstrates, I believe that is a must for those who would do this kind of work. For Skorczewski, it also took years of work as an affiliate scholar at the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute. For the latter, I don't believe this, in particular, is a necessary move, especially for those who have the privilege to attend a life writing course taught in the rhetoric and composition concentration.

This final call to action, then, is not to those who don't want to teach life writing or, especially, to those who may oppose such work. It is to those, particularly in rhetoric and

composition, inclined to teach life writing. We need to increase visibility of this work, whether it be through publication, through courses taught at our universities, or through building networks across universities.

What made me most capable of teaching life writing, of mixing personal with theoretical with relational with social with embodied work, is that I was at a university where I experienced a life writing course *first* as a student. This allowed me the opportunity to hear student uptakes on difficult memoirs, to *feel* the tensions and releases that often come in life writing spaces, to watch a professor negotiate the personal and the theoretical. My time as a student in a life writing course also allowed me the opportunity to study life writing, to choose memoirs, to develop pedagogical approaches, and to write my way to greater understanding. Did all of this allow me to present a perfect life writing class? Not any more than five years of teaching first-year composition has allowed me to perfect that course. What it did, however, was allow me to develop a life writing course where the major issues would *not* be about the ones we are cautioned on when we talk about life writing, but, instead, teaching life writing became about what every course becomes about: the many pedagogical choices we make and remake in any given class we teach more than once.

As example, one student in my first life writing class *did* cry non-productive tears (tears he *wouldn't* testify as being worth it). This student's tears were not over the life writing material, however. They were over a haphazard choice I made concerning technology for the students' final uptake. I chose a site called *Inkle Studios*, which worked well for all but two students. For two students, however, they had their work deleted without warning because of a bug with the site that I hadn't made myself aware of.

As another example, the second time I taught the life writing course, we didn't do the podcast unit. Rather, we did a unit based in play studies. In both courses, by the time we reached Unit 3, I had a felt sense that we had simply been taking on the weightiness and somber sides of life writing for too long, and I wanted to get at another side of life writing, one where students played with something about their lives that they had not yet been comfortable trying, where they also played with a genre that they had never allowed themselves to experiment with. This unit led to presentations/performances, where students, who had documented their tries (podcasts, videos, social media, art classes, even going to dinner and movies alone) presented to the class about their tries. In doing so, the audience also found new ways they might play with aspects of their own lives and their genre attempts. While I found this unit to be successful, there were some students who struggled more with the silliness or play of the unit than with any amount of weighty subject matter we did all semester. Truth be told, when I teach the course a third time, I will still agonize over what Unit 3 should be.

These issues I'm left with in my life writing course, then, are not ones related to whether or not students can thrive in spaces such as life writing, nor does it center around my lack of a license in therapy. Herein lies my greatest hope for life writing in rhetoric and composition: that we can move beyond the tropes and into the greater dialogues. It is time for those inclined to teach life writing to begin building that foundation in rhetoric and composition. Our experience comes from understanding rhetorical situations. It comes from the classes we've taught, the writing we've done, the lives we've lived, and the theories we engage. Wendy Bishop once lamented that she wished that she "had been given more encouragement for investigating the personal, therapeutic, and affective aspects of our field" (Bishop 503), and I'd suggest it's time we become that encouragement to each other. In this regard, I look forward to the day that we, as

life writing instructors, can more easily say, “Yes, I teach life writing and, no, I’m not a therapist. Which is good, because it’s not therapy that I’m teaching.” Instead, we might say: “Yes, I teach life writing, because I’m a life writing instructor, mentored in life writing. Which is good, because it *is* life writing that I’m teaching.”

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CHAPTER IV: WHEN NOTHING IS AS IT SEEMS: TEACHING HARRY POTTER AND
FOUR JOY NARRATIVES

Into Joy: A Hesitation

It's spring 2018. I'm not a literary narrative professor, nor am I an expert in the study of joy, and—as for *Harry Potter*—I'm not sure I've once utilized fiction in my five years teaching composition and life writing. Yet, as a Ph.D. candidate and instructor at Illinois State University, I signed up to teach a course on literary narrative. The theme of the course, which I chose, surrounded the concept of joy. The primary texts, which, again, I chose—the *Harry Potter* books/movies. While my specialization is composition and life writing, I was fortunate to be part of an English Studies model in the Ph.D. program I attended. In this regard, I had taken courses in literature (a literature and theory seminar and a course on storytelling and pedagogy), and I always hoped to teach a literature course. I just thought, when that time came, I would sit and have meticulous conversations with professors and graduate students about how to approach such a course. Instead, I found myself compelled by an *urgency* to teach joy, signed up to teach literary narrative, and, in what felt like two spins, found myself standing in front of close to thirty undergraduate students, the majority, if not all, who were taking this course as a way to fulfill an undergraduate requirement. At the start of the semester, they expressed very little interest in English courses, and, when I (apologetically) gave my first exam as an instructor, (to make sure they built a foundation around the joy narrative terms in order to go forward together as a class), to my English-centric surprise, they expressed a desire to do only exams, if it meant not doing English-y things like writing papers. We didn't do that, of course, but that moment informed me I had an audience initially uninterested in the projects that were to come. Looking back now, at

least the lack of interest in writing papers was conveyed to me. It would only be later in the semester (a few students talking to me after class) and mostly in the final student reflection/uptake documents, that many of these students would reveal that, based on the theme of joy and the *Harry Potter* booklist, they had entered the semester, even before day one, believing that this course was a joke.

It is just as true that, on the first day of the course, I didn't tell these students that one full semester before I had never once had a thought of teaching literary narrative, joy, and *Harry Potter*. I didn't tell them that I had made the decision, somewhat instinctively, after three graduate students had come to my office, each unaware of the others' visits, to tell me some form of the same story ("I came to graduate school excited, joyful. Yet, the atmosphere is so cynical that I've become cynical in order to fit in, and, in doing so, I've lost my joy for doing this.") I didn't tell them that while I understood that an undergraduate student's experience of the academy would likely not be that of a graduate student, I hunched that whatever explicit cynicism reigned at the graduate level at least leaked into the lives of undergraduate students, even if they didn't potentially know it by name. I also believed, though I hadn't yet taught joy, that we were living in times that called for explicit conversations about joy, and that joy, treated on a narrativized level, could be as complicated, as sophisticated, as necessary and satisfying, as one more conversation on cynicism.

Into Joy: A Call

It is, of course, no longer the spring of 2018, but I highlight the difficulty surrounding this move into joy for a number of reasons. For starters, I don't want to forget that initial difficulty when moving into joy. As this essay progresses, readers will see student responses

move from discounting joy to seeing it as integral in the education process. It is easy, if we collapse the struggles that lead to the successes, to forget they even happened. Even more so, as the reader engages with a semester long attempt to theorize, narrativize, and demonstrate pedagogically concepts of joy, I want the reader to see the full picture of what I encountered, as best an essay can convey it, because this essay is also an invitation for readers, particularly teachers, to take up joy in their classrooms, in their scholarship, and in their own lives.

Indeed, in seeing pedagogical relevancy with joy, I hope to see the scholarship in English begin to embrace this concept in a shared, explicit way. While a more extensive review would need to be conducted in order to capture individual uses of joy in scholarship and pedagogy, in preparing to write this essay, I couldn't find anything remotely close to what would be a body of work on joy—a kind of *joy studies*—in English. Often uses of joy, as it will be with Silvan Tomkins in the work that follows, are attached to a list of affects or emotions. In other cases, as it is with *The Journal of the Assembly for Expanded Perspectives on Learning*, arguably a more fertile ground for topics of joy with its mission openly inclusive of embodied and felt work, most of the uses of joy I found came in a handful of manners. In these instances, joy often came, once or barely, with a handful of other terms. For Gesa E. Kirsch, we have created spaces to nourish the inner lives of students when we “invite humor, joy, and discovery” (66); for Kristie S. Fleckenstein, its seeking the strength to “invite change, the patience to wait for change, and the joy in welcoming change” (42); for Jane Thompkins, it's a spiritual reading for self-knowledge that “most of the time makes [her] feel light and clear-headed, sometimes joyful, sometimes loved and understood” (5). I can say that I'm grateful for every use of joy, as it is, at minimum, an acknowledgement of the need for and the existence of joy in academic spaces. However, the uses of joy quoted are brief references to joy, often second to the topic the authors are focused

on. A closer approach to what I'm calling for—theorizing, narrativizing and/or pedagogically demonstrating joy—happens in the work of Robbie Clifton Pinter, in “The Transformative Practice of Writing and Teaching Writing,” where she borrows “Wendell Berry’s ‘Whatever is Foreseen in Joy’ and his metaphor of farming” (103) in order to argue that we, in teaching writing, must “grant ourselves the rich, supple time to wait, to rest, to take Sabbath” as “[w]e can and must foresee in joy” (109). Here joy is being directed. It is being formed into a concept that can be useful. It is being complicated. And, indeed, there remains many ways to complicate and extrapolate joy—from the interiority to the social, cultural realities of any given moment—based on a multitude of factors and needs as it concerns teachers and students of a variety of lived experiences.

It might be asked, then, how do we in English studies foresee in joy? And while this answer can and will be different depending on goal and lived experience, the essay that follows foresees in joy a response to what I have felt as overabundance of cynicism in the academy and in wider society. This essay theorizes joy; it narrativizes joy; it demonstrates joy pedagogically. This essay keeps in mind that it can be a struggle to pursue a topic that is not well trodden. Often times, for instructors, myself included, it is easier to bury a felt sense urgency than to pursue one. We, as instructors, are busy enough. And yet, so often, we still find ourselves contemplating taking up that topic that's just outside of what we've studied—that topic so urgent we find ourselves searching texts online and on shelves to find out more about it. This essay is for the instructor who is seeking to follow their urgency. It is for the instructor who wants motivation to take up that next urgent topic, despite busyness or lack of educational proximity to the topic. It is for the instructor who knows it would be easier not to take up a new topic but has decided to do so anyway. And most of all, the essay that follows serves to demonstrate the need for

conversations on joy in classroom spaces, as well as the need for others to take up the topic of joy, to theorize it, narrativize it, demonstrate it pedagogically, so that we can build up and out an array of approaches to joy in academic spaces.

WNIAIS: Evidence of a Need Does Not Guarantee Interest in a Topic

If teaching were as easy as finding a premise for a course and proving it necessary, the joy course could have wrapped successfully after day one, when I handed out a survey on student experience with joy narratives in their schooling. Particularly interesting was one set of questions—"Has joy ever been an explicit conversation in your classes? If so, when and in what context?"—and the response to them. In response to these questions, 0 out of 27 students reported ever having an explicit conversation about joy in the classroom. After gathering this information and calculating it, I brought it to the students in that room that the amount of time the group of us had spent in school would've been something like *400 years*, and, in those 400 years, there hadn't been a single, explicit conversation or focus on joy.

If the numbers were not illustrative enough of the problem I had hunched, some of the written responses drove this need to talk about joy even further to the forefront. One student, for instance, wrote about the lack of conversation around joy not only in her schooling but in the totality of her life: "Joy isn't something I've discussed with anyone in any area of my life in any context" (Murray). Another student, in the final uptake documents of the semester, still remembered this day one survey, and I am continually grateful for the honesty she was willing to share in her reflection back to it: "I remember the first day when we had to write down where we thought we could find joy. I had absolutely no idea we were talking about the feeling of joy, so I put down the library because I thought joy might have been an author or book" (Canter). These

are the responses one simply can't make up. If I had entered the semester believing that the academy privileges cynicism over joy, that we build sophisticated reasonings and frameworks for cynicism while leaving joy absent or in its simplicity, the initial survey made me certain that I had tapped into a truth that, being illuminated on day one, would lead to one of the most fruitful courses I had taught.

In reality, these truths *would* lead to one of the most fruitful courses I've taught, but it wouldn't happen immediately. As mentioned, there was a strong resistance to joy and *Harry Potter* that began before day one, and though it made students unwilling to initially apply these narratives to their lives, it didn't hinder what the first four weeks were about, which was learning about the four joy narratives we would explore that semester and the difficulty of approaching such narratives if we are not aware of what Silvan Tomkins calls our negative nuclear scripts.

WNIAIS: Establishing Joy Narratives in the Face of Negative Nuclear Scripts

While time and space will not allow a deep dive into the joy narratives we explored those sixteen weeks, it is imperative to give an overview, so that the reader will know what concepts we were working with, as well as to make these concepts available should anyone, teacher or student, wish to take them up or explore them further.

There wasn't a strategic plan in forming what became the four joy narratives. Rather, there was a winter break, and just enough time to find joy narratives, to explore potential texts in light of what undergraduates might digest in the time we had for them, as well as an attempt to get to narratives diverse enough to explore multiple ways of being human from multiple perspectives. What this eventually amounted to are the following joy narratives: joy as mindfulness; relational joy; directional joy; joy as risk. When the opportunity comes to teach this

course again, I would, perhaps, add to or take away from the joy narratives below or pull from other sources to represent them. But what follows are the narratives as they were constituted in the spring of 2018.

The first joy narrative—joy as mindfulness—served as an opportunity for students to be alone with themselves, to make deliberate decisions, and to reflect upon them, especially as the semester went on. This narrative culminated mid-semester with a week-long project where students took five minutes in the morning—to meditate, to reflect, to pray, to be quiet—before writing about it. After the morning meditation, students were to approach the day with purposeful direction (by this time students had been introduced to all the joy narratives and could focus each day on whichever they chose). Students ended each of those seven days with five more minutes alone and another write up. Students posted their responses daily, with this exercise serving to begin bringing the theoretical into the experiential, allowing students to see themselves, their world, and even the tiniest details within a day, in ways that were hopefully new and rewarding. It also helped them see which joy narratives had the most urgency for them when it came to lived experience.

Although mindfulness often begins with aloneness, it continues in our social lives (how we view a moment, how we respond, etc.) In reverse order, the second joy narrative—relational joy—often focuses us first on the social, but certainly penetrates into who we are and how we are when alone. The narrative we took up for relational joy comes through the work of Yale Divinity School’s Professor of Systematic Theology and Africana Studies, Willie James Jennings, where he defines joy as:

An act of resistance against despair and its forces....Joy, in that regard, is a work that can become a state that can become a way of life. [Joy resists] despair and all

the ways that despair wants to drive us toward death and wants to make death the final word. And death, in this regard, is not simply the end of life but it's death in all its signatures—death, violence, war, debt—all the ways in which life can be strangled. (Jennings)

Jennings is asked, in a follow up question to that statement, “How does one forge the weapon of joy,” to which he begins making the relational move necessary in this narrative of joy. Says Jennings, “Well, practically, you have to have people who you’ve heard sing those songs in a strange land. You have to have people who have been able to make you laugh in the places where all you want to do is cry. You have to have conditions set up where those people who have learned to ride the winds of chaos can say to you, ‘Come on, let me show you how to do that’” (Jennings). This portrait of joy as relational, joy as resistance, joy as relational resistance leading to survival, became so prominent in that spring course that, before the semester was over, more than one student would have changed the relationship statuses they entered the semester with, in large part due to a new and better understanding of the relational and how it intersects with joy.

With the third joy narrative—directional joy—I began with the work of C.S. Lewis and worked my way out towards a more secular uptake. For Lewis, joy is a happy and sad longing for something to come (for Lewis, Heaven). All of us, however, understand what it's like to place our joy somewhere out in front of us, only feeling directional hints (and *hits*) of joy on the road that we tell ourselves will lead us to the joy we seek. In this way, we often compared joy as mindfulness (which privileges the present) with directional joy (which often privileges an imagined future). This allowed students to see where their directional habits were and which habits, perhaps, needed to be rounded or lessened or better mixed with other approaches to joy.

For the final joy narrative—joy as risk—we pulled from an article written by Kathleen Byars, entitled, “The Joy of Risk: What Cave Diving Taught Me.” This narrative of joy not only brought in the experiential, but it allowed students to contemplate how risk might be a benefit to their lives, rather than something to avoid for the sake of playing it safe. Most important from the Byars’ article came a rhetorical move that the class made involving a statement from her article, one that would be remembered and used by a student as late as the final semester reflection documents. In her article, Byars writes of her first time cave diving and how much she missed out on in that first dive because thoughts of failure dominated her mind and her view. To capture this feeling, the author writes that, “My heart was racing as I worried about what lies ahead. Kick, glide, worry. Kick, glide, worry. I was unable to enjoy the dive” (Byars). Byars focuses on how, even in risk, our old mindsets (negative nuclear scripts, as we will soon get to) can cause us to doubt and worry to the point that we can’t see the progress we’re making or the reality we’re actually partaking in. In that joy class, we were looking not simply at joy feelings, or joy sentences, but joy *narratives*, a way of seeing and being in the world that could, perhaps, take the place of a negative nuclear script. With these thoughts in mind, the students rerouted Byars’ message on “Kick, glide worry. Klick, glide worry,” claiming that, if we pursue joy knowing its risk and if we continually act within a narrative that understands that joy leads to risk which also includes worry, then the circular failing of the sentences in question could open up to no longer end in worry, turning “Kick, glide, worry. Kick, glide, worry” into “Kick, glide worry. Worry, kick, glide.”

These joy narratives served throughout the semester as lenses in which students could view their lives, finding applications to the personal, familial, and societal aspects of their existences. These lenses also served, as mentioned, as potential narratives to take up should

students discover that aspects of their thinking and behaving had been taken over, habitually, by what affect scholar, Silvan Tomkins, calls negative nuclear scripts.

To attempt to do a broad, substantive treatment of the work of Silvan Tomkins would be beyond the scope of this essay.⁵ I was introduced to Tomkins in graduate school, and though I was blown away by the theoretical potential of his work, it was witnessing his thoughts on a negative nuclear script in my own life, which I've written about previously in "In Search of Affect Affiliation" that made me see the value of distilling some of the thoughts Tomkins puts forth in a pedagogical manner able to be taken up by undergraduate students. For the purposes of this essay, I will highlight a single section of writing by Tomkins on (negative) nuclear scripts.

Before walking us through an example of a negative nuclear script himself, Tomkins illustrates the complexity of nuclear scripts and how they might be called forth not specific to context, writing, "Just as any general theory of personality (e.g., psychoanalysis) has a set of constraints, of assumed laws about the theoretical structure of personality, so may a nuclear script possess the characteristics of a scientific paradigm which enables the individual to extrapolate explanations for apparently remote and contradictory phenomena consistent with the paradigm" (187). This statement, with the individual capable of taking a negative course of thought and applying it to new life situations (almost unaware and without thought to the newness of the situation or an opportunity to break with the thinking), becomes essential for an instructor attempting to teach critical, creative, and reflective thinking to their students. If the reasoning isn't clear, Tomkins gives a plain example of someone making these remote and

⁵ For those wishing to do a deeper dive on Tomkins, I would recommend a collection of his work, *Shame and Its Sisters*, put together by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Franks.

contradictory applications to their lives: “If a [person] who has suffered humiliation all their life suddenly meets with praise, how will that person integrate praise into a lifetime of experienced humiliation which in part has been shaped by their negative script?” (187). The answer? That person likely *won't* integrate praise. Tomkins tells us that, “While it is possible to develop positive scripts...the weight of experience is played out in the nuclear script. These appear ‘to the person [with a negative script] to have robbed them of what might otherwise have been a possibly better life’” (187). What becomes important out of this example, when it comes to nuclear scripts, particularly to the *negative* ones, is the “lifetime of experienced humiliation” (187). These scripts often begin in childhood, in trauma, in any continuation of believing (or being made to believe) that we deserve the negative in our lives and are not worthy of better things. These scripts become so prevalent that they play out through us uncritically, without our need to call upon them. Amazingly, Tomkins lists *eight* ways the man in the scenario mentioned might allow his negative script to prevent receiving or considering the compliment given:

First, the sincerity of the judge may be questioned. Second, “He praised only this work of mine because he knows that everything else I have done is trash.” Third, “He may be sincere, but he is probably a fool.” Fourth, “This is a temporary lapse of his judgment. When he comes to his senses, he will have all the more contempt for me.” Fifth, “What I have done is a fluke which I can never do again.” Sixth, “He is trying to control me, holding out a carrot of praise. If I eat this I am hooked and I will thenceforth have to work for his praise and to avoid his censure.” Seventh, “He is exposing how hungry I am for praise and thus exposing my inferiority and my feelings of humiliation.” Eighth, “He is seducing me into striving for something more which I cannot possibly achieve.” (187)

It's staggering each time I read these eight explanations in succession. It is important to note, even at the risk of belaboring the point, that each of these explanations keeps a person in their negative nuclear script *without any critical thinking regarding the specific person or situation*. Sure, there could be people we meet where any number of these reasons are valid and applicable but, when acting from a negative nuclear script, these reasons come without critical thought, as carryover from former situations, in order to keep us in the habits of our own discomfort. For those with similar positive scripts, the experience is just as uncritical (though maybe happier). Says Tomkins, "There are many different avenues to predominately positive- or negative-affect nuclear scripts. The crucial features are the repeated sequences of scenes which end either in joy or despair. These depend variously upon the different combinations of the benign and malign environments and upon the strong or weak inner resources to deal with such opportunities and constraints" (187).

It is imperative, then, in reading about the combination of environment *and* the inner strength/weakness of the individual, when teaching a course that seeks to make students aware of these scripts and to challenge them to recognize and confront such scripts, that the course be focused on *both* the environmental, external world *and* about building up strong inner resources within the students in the course. In fact, over the years, I have come to spotlight this concept from Tomkins in any course that includes *any* amount of self-reflection. I've done this for reasons that might seem obvious but need stating: not much is more frustrating, in class or in life, than to spend months attempting to reflect, to think critically, to think creatively, only to end up in the same exact place because we are not aware that, at a larger level, our reflecting, our critical and creative thinking, is all being routed by a negative nuclear script so pervasive that it has long ago created the course on which our thoughts will and won't move.

I have found, over years of teaching about this script, that to challenge it takes calling it by name, to take up what I'd call a life writing approach, generally speaking, that centers on bearing witness to others and their stories (relational witnessing) and to our own felt senses (to examine what rises up in us when hearing another's story and why), in order to begin contending with this often-default state of thinking and being.⁶

In the course on joy, we started with the joy narratives and the negative nuclear script as theoretical. We would ultimately apply them to our own lives. But in-between, we used the *Harry Potter* series to learn to recognize when these narratives and scripts were playing out in the lives of the characters, how and why, in order to eventually be able to do the same with our own lives.

WNIAIS: “Yeh don’t know what yeh are?” *Harry Potter* and the Negative Nuclear Script

If this course looks, at this point, like a straight line from theory to textual examples to personalized uptake, it would ignore the issue that I would only *fully* understand after the final semester uptake documents, but that I felt early and often in the semester. In the early weeks of the course, there was some kind of resistance to something we were doing in that classroom.

This resistance didn't interfere with basic levels of student activity. Students studied for that initial exam; they learned to recite the joy narratives; they did just fine grade-wise. But when it came to discussions, at least early on, I could feel an unwillingness from students to go deeper

⁶ For a more in-depth read on how I take up life writing as affective and relational, as bearing witness to others and oneself, see “Can I Be/Get a Witness: An Open Letter to the Life Writing Students I’ve Not Yet Met.”

about joy or to engage the *Harry Potter* readings. In some ways, there is nothing more frustrating than a felt sense understanding of resistance. It doesn't offer specifics, so it doesn't allow for targeted pedagogical attempts at changing opinions. On the other hand, if I had known the level of resistance to both joy and *Harry Potter*, that it started before the semester, and how deeply it ran, it might have been enough to throw the semester off in the early stages.

When I initially coded student uptake responses from their final reflection for a presentation at the C.S. Lewis & Friends conference, I summarized the following quotes from students in that class as "Early Semester Doubt" or E.S.D. The quotes mostly come from the end of the semester, and these students did not hesitate to articulate how they felt coming into the class:

When I saw the booklist, I felt really bad about signing up for the class (Wyatt); What kind of class am I in that we are going to focus on joy, and *Harry Potter* no less (Pike); I honestly thought this was going to be the class I was going to drop (Shragal); I laughed out loud a bit when I first saw...the required readings (Norris); My parents were a little bit confused when I told them that I was going to be reading the *Harry Potter* books as a requirement (Western); I saw that we had to read *Harry Potter* books, and honestly, I wanted to puke (Miller). (Combs "On")

In retrospect, the resistance makes sense. Students had *never* engaged the topic of joy as an educational pursuit, and many students I've encountered in their generation have already formed an opinion that they would never read the *Harry Potter* series. (It is useful to note that many students, like the one who said the idea of reading the series made her want to puke, would eventually be upset with me because we didn't have time to read *the entire series*.) It is much

easier to move forward in retrospect, of course, but at that point in the semester, I had to keep moving past the felt resistance regardless, as my plan for the course was to use the *Harry Potter* series to help students locate negative nuclear scripts and joy narratives, so that we could later do that same work in our own lives.

For this pedagogical plan, the use of the *Harry Potter* books/movies continued from early in the semester until the end of the semester. As the series served to assist students in locating negative nuclear scripts and joy narratives in an array of characters with an array of motivations, habits, and end goals, each reading/viewing came with homework that assisted students in finding these narratives (prompts, questions, etc.). In order to ensure *some* deep dives from each student at some point in the semester, students were broken up into groups, so that, with each reading/viewing, one group knew, each time, that they would take the lead on discussion.

The hope, as mentioned, went beyond critical reading skills, discussion skills, or to locate scripts in characters. The transfer goal, which I will focus on in the next two sections, was that students could then bring back these skills to their own lives. In order to demonstrate how we took up the series, I will use the character, Harry Potter, in *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, to illustrate how we located negative nuclear scripts and joy narratives. Specifically, I will focus on Harry's *development of a negative nuclear script; how his script continued to play out, even in a new environment; his eventual pushback against his negative script.*

Concerning the *development of a negative nuclear script*, it was instrumental to point out from the beginning of our discussions that *the boy who lived* begins his story, as far as he knows it, not in magic or heroism, but in identity abuse and trauma that leads to a negative nuclear script. In fact, to search out how Harry's negative nuclear script is formed in his first ten years of his life is far easier than looking for examples that *wouldn't* lead to a negative script. As readers

of the series know, Harry's parents die at the hands of Voldemort when Harry is still an infant. Because of this, Harry lives the first ten years of his life with an aunt and uncle who didn't want to take him in, as well as with a cousin, Dudley, who has free reign to bully Harry, physically and mentally, however he sees fit. In the early chapters of the first book, *the boy who lived* quickly becomes *the boy who lived in a cupboard*, with leftovers, with spiders, with things, narratively and metaphorically speaking, that are alive *but barely*. Harry himself is a leftover, an afterthought. And here comes a question we explored in and out of the text: *how might a person think when they themselves are an afterthought?* When you are put last by your family, your school, your community, your friends, by greater society, what narratives are you left to form about yourself?

For Harry, he knows his value (or lack thereof) before he is ten years old. He is always to come last in line, unless that line is meant for servitude. Harry is the cooker of bacon; Dudley is the consumer. Harry is the watcher of birthdays; Dudley is the receiver of gifts. And here comes a second discussion we had in and out of the text: *if there were better spaces for Harry outside the home, those spaces may have helped against the forming of a negative nuclear script*. But we are told that, at school, "Harry had no one. Everybody knew that Dudley's gang hated that odd Harry Potter in his baggy old clothes and broken glasses, and nobody liked to disagree with Dudley's gang" (30). At this point in the discussion, we paused to see the unfairness, the circular nature, of abusive events that lead to negative thinking that lead to negative scripts. After all, the Dursley's are the ones who, in private, dress Harry in baggy old clothes and broken glasses, and their son, Dudley, is the one who exploits him for those very reasons in public. That is how it often is with the formation of a negative script: either society dresses us for abuse that carries over into our home and our own thinking or our home and thinking dresses us for abuse

that carries over to more public spaces. Either way, seeing the same outcome in multiple spaces is a sad but sure way to adopt negative scripts around what comes to feel like our lot in life.

Because these scripts take hold of us in our thoughts, in our narratives, and in our actions (or lack thereof), it is important for me that students learn how to think critically and creatively about their thoughts and narratives, as well as have spaces in the course to take up their lives experientially. While I knew the experiential was coming later in unit 3, when students would do a presentation/performance where they would have to choose a genre of delivery to speak affectively about their own lives in context with both the negative nuclear script and at least one of the four joy narratives (mindfulness; relational; direction; risk), a goal in reading the first *Harry Potter* book became allowing them to see and discover how each of these joy narratives played against Harry's negative nuclear script.

How the script continued to play out, even in a new environment is pivotal but easy to miss if we are not reading critically and creatively. The easy narrative from book one, if we know the story too well, is that Harry gets recruited to Hogwarts, leaves the Dursley family, and moves on to better (though still complicated) things. What I hoped to share with students in Harry's transition to Hogwarts, however, is twofold: *intervention against a negative nuclear script so often involves the relational*, but, even then, *the script doesn't simply cease to play out*.

Because Harry's recruitment to Hogwarts unfolds in such a *big* way (owls bombarding the Dursley home with invites; a giant, Hagrid, chasing after the fleeing Dursleys), it becomes imperative to use metaphor here to make transfer into student lives. I remind students that, even before being recruited to Hogwarts, Harry was soon to be separated from Dudley anyway. Dudley was preparing to go to a private school. The text informs us that "This was why Harry spent as much time as possible out of the house, wandering around and thinking about the end of

the holidays, where he could see a tiny ray of hope. When September came he would be going off to secondary school and, for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley" (31-32). I like the language in this passage so much: Harry was wandering and thinking. Harry with the negative nuclear script. Harry with no motion in his life. Now he's wandering and thinking, because, as the text says, "for the first time in his life, he wouldn't be with Dudley (31-32)." In this context, I would surmise that what the text calls a "tiny ray of hope," was likely *as much hope* as Harry dared maintain or look straight in the face. In fact, in the context of a negative nuclear script, I remind the students that it might have been *easier* for Harry to start at a public school (with low expectations for him) than at Hogwarts (where he was thought to have stopped Voldemort). As someone with a negative nuclear script, it would be difficult enough, even without Dudley, for Harry to live a life free of the impact Dudley had left upon him. Often, for those who don't yet know what a negative nuclear script is, it can be the worst thing to get what we believe to be our dream (or even *a* dream) because that opportunity might lead to self-sabotage, as, deep down, the victim of the script only knows how to continue in the ill treatment they've always known.

Readers of the series already know that public school isn't the only option that would ultimately be set in place. Harry Potter, who never had a friend, except maybe a one-time run-in with a snake, was about to witness a full court press of relational outreach. It's worth noting, the letter that came to Harry from Hogwarts, came to him *where he was*. This letter was addressed to:

Mr. H. Potter

The Cupboard under the Stairs

This location is, of course, a physical location. Hogwarts isn't writing to Harry Potter who *deserves* to live in The Cupboard Under the Stairs. That, in itself, is already a difference in how Harry is treated relationally by Hogwarts versus what he's experienced with his aunt and uncle.

In the Hogwarts outreach to Harry, then, we are witnessing relational joy, much like it's described by Jennings, where "those...who have learned to ride the winds of chaos can say to you, 'Come on, let me show you how to do that'" (Jennings). In a too-easy read of what follows, something unlike what Harry has ever known shows up and, while there is astonishment, this new reality whisks him away to a new and better life. But this isn't how it happens in the text, and it's not how it happens in the lives of anyone with an unchallenged negative nuclear script. This is where metaphor comes into play, as I asked the students to imagine, in the Hogwarts outreach to Harry, that the greatest relational intervention they could imagine happens to them, and, with the giant Hagrid showing up, that the biggest dream they could imagine knocks on their door. Would that mean the end of a negative script and the undoing of all that came before in their lives?

Most students know, once challenged explicitly with these questions, that the answer is "no." With critical reading, we see our hunches play out with Harry. In the early stages, Harry is astonished that anyone is writing to him. He is curious, and he becomes angry when he isn't allowed to see the letters. For the Dursley's part, they created the negative nuclear script for Harry, and they've been hitting him in it ever since. Being dull thinkers, they try the same thing with Hogwarts Headmaster, Dumbledore, saying, "No, we'll ignore [the letters]. If they don't get an answer..." (36). The text trails off there, so I'll finish it for Vernon Dursley. "If they don't get

an answer, they'll lower their head, lower their eyes, give up. Just like Harry, who we've beat down with this negative nuclear script.”

But here comes the difference in a positive script, sent from Dumbledore and Hogwarts on the wings of an owl. When Vernon steals the first letter and moves Harry to Dudley's second bedroom, Harry receives a letter addressed to Mr. H. Potter, *The Smallest Bedroom* (38). When they board up the mail slot the letters begin to arrive 12 at a time. After 12, 24. From 24, 40. And when Vernon packs up the car and moves the family to the end of the world, the only reason the letters stop is because Hogwarts sends the gentle giant, Hagrid, to find and invite Harry in person.

Imagine being Harry Potter, who has never had a friend. It's not yet a new narrative that is threatening the negative nuclear script. It is a new *lived experience*. The whole drama with the letters began when Dudley alerted Vernon that, “Harry's got something,” because Harry should never have anything. Why? Because he doesn't have *anyone*. This again is *relational*. And now Harry is being sought after, and the Dursleys, in resisting Hogwarts, are, for the first time, making their life choices around Harry Potter.

And what a night, on Harry's 11th birthday, when this someone seeking, in the form of Hagrid, breaks down the door to the Dursley hideaway to unleash a 50/50 combination of potential new narratives and an immediately new experiential.

We are soon arriving at the application of the metaphor that demonstrates the pervasiveness of a negative nuclear script. If a single relational performance could bring about a joy that destroys a negative nuclear script, Hagrid's would have done so. Hagrid tells Harry more in one statement than Harry's been told in ten years when the gentle giant says, “Last time I saw you, you was only a baby....Yeh look a lot like yer dad, but yeh've got yer mom's eyes” (47).

All news to Harry: the giant has met Harry before, knew Harry's parents, and has connected Harry to them in a way that has never been done prior. No wonder the text tells us that "Harry felt the warmth wash over him as though he'd sunk into a hot bath" (48).

And Hagrid's greatest anger? It's not with how Harry has been treated but, instead, with how Harry's *narrative* has been treated, with how it's been deleted and replaced. After discovering that Harry doesn't know about Hogwarts, his parents, or magic, Hagrid says, "that this boy—this boy!—knows nothing about—about ANYTHING?" (49). And then comes six words that reveal how a negative nuclear script stands in front of the potential script one might otherwise have developed. Hagrid asks and declares altogether, "Yeh don't know what yeh are?" (50).

And now we have arrived at the transfer, at the metaphor. If we transfer the giant in Harry Potter to *the gigantic* in our own life, we come to realize that even if the greatest fantasy or escape that we could imagine, the reality that falls upon us that tells us we are not our negative script, were to drop from the sky, confront us, and attempt to lead us out, it would never, in one night, deliver us of a script we've been living for most of our lives prior to that moment. It doesn't work that way in life, nor does it work that way in *Harry Potter*. Even when a giant tracks Harry down to the ends of the world, tells him he's a wizard, and invites him to the best Wizarding school in the Wizarding world, one event does not a negative nuclear script break. In fact, the impact of this new experiential and potential reality doesn't last 24 hours without the return of the negative nuclear script, as we are told:

Harry woke early the next morning. Although he could tell it was daylight, he kept his eyes shut tight. "It was a dream," he told himself firmly. "I dreamed a giant called Hagrid came to tell me I was going to a school for wizards. When I

open my eyes I'll be at home in my cupboard." There was suddenly a loud tapping noise. And there's Aunt Petunia knocking on the door, Harry thought, his heart sinking. But he still didn't open his eyes. It had been such a good dream.

(61)

There is a reason I began this section by stating that what happened to Harry, in the forming of his negative nuclear script, was an abuse of his identity. Even in the face of a new experiential, Harry's view of an inferior identity is so great that he literally closes his eyes to this new reality. Intentions aside, the world that Harry was closing his eyes against is one where Hagrid is there, the school is real, and people will love young Harry Potter. Rather than run out into this new reality, Harry closes his eyes and holds on to an old way of protecting himself, going inward.

This is a fair enough response. It takes a long time, rightly so, to become convinced that a new reality is a safe reality. Even then, it may take even longer to understand the cruel irony that the inward place one used to go to protect oneself is now the very place that holds that old reality, that negative nuclear script.

In fact, on the very next page, Harry goes from realizing his new reality (a second time) and feeling "so happy he felt as though a large balloon was swelling inside him" (62) to, by the bottom of the *same* page, realizing he doesn't have money and assuming, again, that this would bar him from Hogwarts and return him to the Cupboard. With a close read, the negative nuclear script rises again and again. *It's Harry only knowing enough about the Slytherin house to think they're evil and then, of course, thinking he would be placed with them. It's Harry, when McGonagall catches him flying on his broom, assuming nothing less than expulsion and imagining himself returned back to the Dursley's steps.* In fact, more than bathroom trolls and a

three-headed dog, which aren't even opponents for the entirety of the first book, it is the negative nuclear script that will challenge Harry throughout the entire series.

This is why it takes so long to even approach the potential for *eventual pushback against the negative script*. It takes more than a relational moment of joy. It takes relational stability and consistency. It also takes joy as risk, where one can get out there, be tested, and try and fail and succeed, without any outcome determining the ultimate value of the person.

And that's what Harry Potter does in/with this first year at Hogwarts.

He's not successful in the first book because he is *the boy who lived*. He's successful in the first book because he's *the boy who stayed*—stayed at Hogwarts and would eventually outstay his negative nuclear script.

Yet, even the progress Harry makes in the first book is challenged towards the end. This happens in a conflict between mindfulness and directional joy. In my favorite chapter in the entire book, Harry finds a mirror—the Mirror of Erised—that shows him the deepest desire of his heart. Here Harry sees the image of his dead parents alive and, suddenly, present reality, from food to friends to his life mission, loses importance. Harry begins distancing himself from his new friends, as he continually sneaks off to sit in front of the mirror. Ultimately, it is Dumbledore, the liberal Headmaster who often lets Harry sneak off to fight deadly physical battles, who draws the line at the danger of the mirror: “People have wasted away before [the mirror], entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible” (213). If Harry cannot overcome looking into the mirror, as it is with the negative nuclear script, he might as well have never left for Hogwarts. And, as noted, the actions in the book reveal that Dumbledore would rather Harry chase the sorcerer's stone and a mass murderer, Voldemort, than sit in front of a false narrative. While the mirror may *seem* safer, it's

actually only more deceptive, as the dangers of the external world will not leave Harry, or us, simply because we leave them alone.

At the end of Harry's first adventure at Hogwarts, *The Boy Who Stayed* says he thinks Dumbledore taught them "just enough" to venture out.

Just enough.

And Dumbledore is right. To break the negative nuclear script—and it may take years or be a lifelong project—part of what you have to do is take action, so often and so outside what your script says you are capable of doing that eventually even you say of your script, "If this [negative script] is me, who is the person doing all these amazing, frightening, exciting things that I'm not supposed to 'be able' to do?"

It's when we see our actions exceed our script that change truly takes place. At that moment, our narrative is no longer located where we place our thoughts.

Where then, we might rightly ask, is our narrative located?

It is located where we focused unit 3: in the experiential.

In other words, it is located wherever we place our feet.

WNIAIS: Vulnerable Experiential → Vulnerable Uptake → Vulnerable Experiential

If the transfer from the life of Harry Potter tells us one thing, it's that this subject matter takes time to recognize, understand, and engage. For the success that was to come for the students in this class, it took a scaffolding of concepts and applications. From taking time to learn the narratives, to applying them to a text, to projects that included interviewing friends and/or professors about the role of joy in their lives, to keeping seven-day joy journals that began and ended in five minute meditations/reflections, to the continual dialoguing as a class about

these concepts, each portion of the course served to familiarize joy, deepen the concepts, and apply them personally and collectively.

As far as the breakthroughs that came, at least in this one course, they seemed to ultimately center around unit 3, when students had to choose a performance genre in which to discuss negative nuclear scripts and joy narratives in their own lives. Much like the rest of this course, the build up to this unit was not what it seemed in regards to the ultimate uptake from the unit. During the build, I had students bring in speeches and performances that moved them, that challenged them effectively (by the genre) and affectively (at an embodied level). Students brought in TED Talks, spoken word, songs, and many other forms of presentations and performances. This part of the unit went well enough, but it was the idea that they would need to be vulnerable, to bring their lives into conversation with the narratives from the course, that seemed to form an emotional paralysis in the build to the performances. Such was the felt resistance to this project that, for the one and only time in my five years teaching, I wondered what would happen in a classroom if the entire student population simply decided they were not going to participate.

Having taught life writing on several occasions, I understand that some resistance and uncertainty in the face of vulnerability will happen. The process of vulnerability, much like joy, is often absent in classroom spaces. Because of this, I have long ago learned that if I am asking vulnerability, it is up to me to go first in *demonstrating* vulnerability. Sometimes this looks like me talking about topics I might engage if I were a student doing that project. (I often discuss a variety of topics, some slightly embarrassing or unexpected, in order to bring home that any topic can work if it is pertinent to the student's urgency and journey.)

For unit 3, I chose to demonstrate the performance genre by going first. I decided to deliver a hybrid performance of a speech and spoken word, based on an urgency in my own life that semester combined with dialogue between Harry and Voldemort from the fifth installment of the series, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. To do a demonstration of unit 3 was not a pedagogical decision that I made early in the semester. Rather, it was due to an affective prompting I had while watching the fifth *Harry Potter*.

In that same semester, I began something of a “not-relationship” relationship with a friend who was proving to be, despite whatever we didn’t call ourselves, far more than that. This lived experience with her was thriving despite a lifetime of trust issues that clustered together in a very controlling negative nuclear script. I started my presentation by talking about a division of Shane’s in the first twenty-plus years of my life. There was the experiential Shane, who often felt lonelier and more misunderstood *in* relationships than alone. Then there was a very strange narrativized Shane who, despite knowing this about himself (or, perhaps, *in* knowing this about himself) had once had a long and passionate relationship with really bad teen drama TV shows like *Dawson’s Creek* and *One Tree Hill*.

It was, at this point, that I teased being able to quote an entire breakup scene from *One Tree Hill*, despite having not watched that scene in over a decade.

“I can quote it, but you wouldn’t want me to do that—to play both Lucas and Brooke from a fight in *One Tree Hill*.

You wouldn’t want that.

Would you?”

And then I performed the scene.

As mentioned, I have learned, in asking students to be vulnerable, I need to be vulnerable first. I have also learned, in asking students to contribute something personal to the class, they sometimes assume personal to mean *heaviest and most personal thing about you*. This is, of course, a myth, and, in order to bring that realization to students, I often at least partially include topics that include embarrassing moments, unexpected ones—moments that allow them to laugh at me and see that vulnerability is little more than a truth that contains urgency, and it comes in packages serious and funny. In the times that I do perform a unit, I attempt to provide moments that allow them to laugh at me and, somewhere in the *same* performance, to get serious and learn with me as well.

Before long, I had progressed my story, and we had moved from fun to urgency. The “not relationship” relationship had sneaked up on me when I least expected it. Romantic relationships were something that, quite honestly, I had stopped seeking more than half a decade prior. What made this interesting, perhaps, is that she had long ago ceased seeking relationships as well. Both of us identified as highly sensitive⁷, and we talked often about how much worse it is to try to connect with someone only to be misunderstood than to not attempt to connect at all. Before long, my classroom performance moved to the negative nuclear script. Like Harry, whose response to wanting to go to Hogwarts was to mentally return himself back to the Cupboard, I

⁷ In general, highly sensitive temperament is thought to be a personality trait, found in roughly 1 to 5 people, that constitutes a sensitive nervous system, deep awareness of subtleties in one’s environment, along with, in some contexts, a potential to be easily overwhelmed and overstimulated. A majority, though not all of highly sensitive persons, are thought to be introverts. For more information, see *The Highly Sensitive Person* by Elaine Aron.

told my students that my biggest problem with my “not relationship” partner—what offended me most about her!—was that *every time we got to a point where she should misunderstand me or confirm my worst thoughts about relationships, she stood in front of those moments, understanding me and causing me to reimagine what I thought I knew*. And this is the vulnerability of it all: this statement was meant to be as outrageous and absurd as it was sad and true.

As mentioned, I performed this story to the backdrop of Harry Potter and Voldemort debating love and trust. Book five is pivotal for Harry and the concept of relational joy. It’s in book five that Voldemort learns to connect to Harry’s mind, and he uses that connection to isolate Harry, which causes Harry to lash out and isolate his closest friends. Worse, by the end of that installment, Harry watches the closest connection he has to a father figure be murdered. Like the metaphor-transfer of Hogwarts and Hagrid in book one, the death of Sirius Black embodied for me the broken thinking of a person who has grown up in abusive relationships that mistake love for pain. Many of Harry’s relationships, such as the ones with his aunt and uncle, are based in pain and shame. Then, like the good relationships that seem to seldom come to a person with the negative nuclear script I was bringing forth in my performance, the ones worth keeping ultimately pass away.

“If to love either means abuse or loss,” went my negative nuclear script for decades, “what’s the point in trying?” Turns out someone in the *Harry Potter* series agreed with my script: the most notorious, mass-murdering villain, Lord Voldemort.

With the murder of Harry’s closest adult relationship, Voldemort encourages Harry to kill in response to seeing Sirius die. Here the metaphor-transfer speaks plainly: if you suffer loss, like a death, kill any potential for more loss before it comes your way. As my performance reached a

close, I used spoken word, directed toward my “not relationship” partner, in order to bring home the affective uptake. I tell her there is a such thing as loving love. There is also a such thing as misunderstanding love. But both of these are scripts that leave out the experiential and the relational—leave out the context of the actual human beings that make the relational endeavor either worthy or unworthy of our time. If we reach beyond the script, we discover that none of the functions or dysfunctions are a product of the “thing” we define as love as much as they are a result of the people we choose to be when “in” this thing we define as love. I tell her I understand, better than I wish, what Voldemort tells Harry: choose to kill, lose your conscience, and you will never have to hurt again. I then tell her a truth that is as important for me to hear as my audience: in this conversation around love and trust, I have lived my life more as Voldemort than Harry.

I had no idea how students might respond to such a performance; no more than they know how they will be received. Ultimately, however, it began a shift in that classroom space that would only increase when they began to do their performances.

These students, by now able to separate the experiential from the theoretical and narrativized, pointed out that no matter what we did or didn’t call our relationship, and no matter what I said I was or wasn’t able to do, that the experiential of it had already exceeded the claims of my own negative script. This reaction came in a classroom conversation about the performance, but responses would continue as late as the final uptake documents, where one student wrote, “First off, thank you for being vulnerable in front of a class full of college students, that takes courage and makes the difference in a class such as this one” (Kalafut). Another time, weeks after my performance, I started class, but a handful of students were still gathered in the back, drawing on a blackboard opposite of me.

When they stepped away, I saw this image dedicated to my performance:

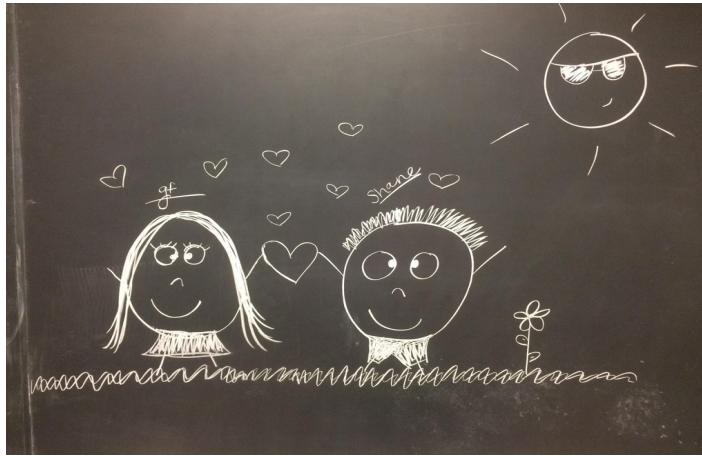


Figure 1: Created by students in the English 125 course on joy

Such an image may seem silly or frivolous, but I look at it in context to a group of students who had entered the classroom fully convinced that the topic of joy and the texts of *Harry Potter* were too silly and frivolous for academic learning. By unit 3, however, not only were students paying tribute to the merging of theory and lived experience, of joy and struggle, but they were also performing unit 3 projects that moved me as much as anything I've witnessed as an instructor. Students who had barely spoken in class talked about their struggles in childhood and adulthood, mixing joy narratives and negative scripts. One student talked about an abusive father, the first time he was old enough to stand up to him, and the difficulties that relationship still has on his concept of relational joy. Another powerful moment came from a student whose social anxiety is such that, if you knew nothing about it, the almost impossibility of her public speaking voice (almost disappearing on her as she tried to talk) would tell you all you needed to know. This student broke the tension in the classroom, when midway through her performance, she let out a piercing shout of triumph and a right-handed chop as an affective demonstration of a momentary defeat of her social anxiety. In a collaborative performance, two

students who felt they never would have made it through college without each other, sought to embody the affective by writing letters to each other detailing what their relationship had meant, only to hear the letters for the first time standing in front of the classroom.

In unit 3, each of the four joy narratives were pursued, in some form, and, in final uptakes, students made it clear that one of the most impactful parts of the semester was when they saw their peers be vulnerable in the breaking down of their own scripts in pursuit of joy narratives:

I thought you were kind of crazy when you introduced [unit 3]. I was nervous and did not know how I was supposed to get personal with a group of strangers. I feel like you knew we were going to feel this way but you challenged us and I appreciate that (Canter); [The unit 3] presentations were so different than any presentation I've ever had to do and I think that's what made them so special. Every single person had such a personal topic and no two were the same or even remotely similar (Belousek); I also really liked [unit 3]. I am definitely guilty of judging people before I get to know them, and I think the worst thing I do is assume that people haven't been through much in their [lives] and have it easy. I really don't like that I do that and this section of the semester...really opened my eyes to what other people go through (Heidcamp). (Combs "On")

For a semester where nothing was as it seemed, it was at this time where students were seeing their instructor, seeing each other, seeing themselves, as far more than their public faces and performances. As one student wrote above, "no two [performances] were the same or even remotely similar" (Belousek). Yet each performance was personal and vulnerable and inclusive

of theory, narrative, and experience, and all this proximity to struggle, difficulty, and pain came to us through the lens of *joy*.

What moved me most about this robust uptake, however, is that it wasn't only centered around one assigned performance. In many of the final uptakes, students revealed that they had seen growth in their lives in ways that could impact them in and outside the classroom:

This class made me do things I would never do. It made me stand up in front of a group of people and talk about my personal problems (Ervin); ...being able to put names to my emotions and joy is very important...to recreating these [experiences] (Wyatt); I [now] know how others got through awful events and how they have found joy, so I know I will be able to do the same (Miller); I will also try to pass on what I've learned about [joy] and try to help people find the joy that they feel is missing in their lives (Rodriguez); [Joy narratives] are not just something that I learned, but something I can apply to my life and better myself as an individual (Skinner). (Combs "On")

These narratives represent the best in what I try to teach, a conglomeration of theory and lived experience, not always attainable in sixteen weeks but cherished when it is. The quotes above demonstrate the experiential with action words or phrases: "stand up"; "put names to my emotions and joy"; "be able to [get through awful events]"; "be able to help people"; "apply [joy narratives] to my life."

In conjunction with these hints and nods to action in their own lives, a few students put it more specifically and spelled it out relationally. One student, who had struggled with social anxiety her whole life, told me she got into her first romantic relationship because of the class. Another student ended a five-year relationship because, after he learned to analyze our four joy

narratives, he realized they had rarely been present in his relationship. Several students reported that this was the only class they talked about to their friends and family. And in an ironic move from the first impressions of the course, one student recommended the books to his friend while another purchased texts for a friend.

These uptakes would be powerful in a course that had gone well from the start, but they continue to move me, in part, because of the assumptions surrounding joy we had to fight against just to get *any* buy-in on the theme of the course. In this regard, I find myself, at the conclusion of this essay, returning to where I started before teaching this course: contemplating the need for joy in the academy and the best ways to bring forth this topic.

Into Joy: Continuation

The only other pertinent cluster of student uptake responses I've yet to share is a strange one, a paradoxical one—a cluster that seems to demonstrate almost a double bind of resistance initially against joy. Many of the students who at first would be turned off by a class they perceived to be outside the educational norms (using joy and *Harry Potter*), also admitted to being put off by the educational system as it normally is:

School does not allow people to open up and be themselves. There is this standard that everyone seems to be living by in school but this class made us break that standard and I loved it (Ervin); You changed what I think the potential of the classroom could be and I appreciate that a lot (Wyatt); I think this class should be given to students at least once in their schooling (Heidcamp); It is the only gen ed class that has dealt with personal and real-life circumstances (Barrow); Joy should be more heavily

discussed in education because it is something that so many individuals lack because they do not truly know what joy is (Davis); I am not a huge fan of the educational system. I think it's too standardized for how much variety there is in the student population. Yet...you created a little bubble that was our classroom, gave everyone their own voice, and let students be vulnerable and individual in a system that does not promote such activities (Kalafut). (Combs "On")

These quotes are important for at least a couple of reasons. The first being that they demonstrate that our scripts can be so strong that, while we oppose a system as it is, we may still find ourselves skeptical of an alternative approach to the normative approach. These quotes are also important, however, especially for those interested in taking up their own pedagogical approach to joy, as they demonstrate that students can come into a classroom convinced of one thing and leave convinced of something else entirely, despite how improbable the ideas or how deep the initial disdain.

Most compelling to me from the quotes above are the two students who now believe that joy should be taught at some point in the learning experiences of every student. To measure that response against the initial resistance to these ideas demonstrates the need to teach a sophisticated approach to joy. In approaching joy, according to several of the students, we approached the experiential, including the individual, voice, urgency, place in the world. This concept is embraced by the student who wrote that the course created a little bubble, or, a joy bubble. I will conclude by using this concept to state what I now believe a joy bubble is and isn't.

First and foremost, a joy bubble *isn't* a get-out-of-difficult-learning pass. A joy bubble *isn't* an opportunity to stay in naivety or behind a forcefield against the difficulties that flaunt

themselves at individual, familial, and societal levels. And maybe most important: a joy bubble, or a pursuit of joy, is rarely, maybe never, *specifically about joy*. Our course was about mindfulness, about relationships, about life directions, about risk, about negative nuclear scripts—joy is more so a light filter that gives hope to the seemingly hopeless, light to the darkness, reason to the pursuit of difficult paths that, if framed with joy narratives, might extend beyond reasons such as *because life is difficult, or hopeless, or impossible*. In my opinion and experience, current culture gives us enough of those last three reasons already.

Of equal importance then is what a joy bubble *is*. A joy bubble is an opportunity to learn what is new, unexpected, and nontraditional. A joy bubble is an expansion of concepts, sometimes seemingly contradictory ones, that include trauma, negativity, scripts that we would never have chosen for our lives, but, in the same bubble, an inclusion of both positive and negative examples of relationships, mindfulness, direction, risk. A joy bubble is narrativized; it is theorized; it is lived experience. A joy bubble, perhaps, most of all, is *expansive*: towards greater learning, greater living, and towards dialogue and action with people who were not even originally in the course or part of the joy bubble.

A joy bubble is expansive as well, because it is yet to be taken up by scholars, instructors, and students, whose lived experiences and approaches to joy will continue to enlighten this path and to begin a more inclusive, more expansive conversation into what we might someday call joy studies. In the academy, particularly in English Studies, we have, rightly, had a history of shining a light on places that are difficult—places painful, unjust, unkind. Too many times, however, we have seemingly treated aspects of positive emotional health as either binary to, or in need of elimination for the sake of, exploring what is difficult. When I look at students in my classrooms, and more so by the year, I see people who understand, on some level, how much is wrong in the

world. And, sure, those concepts need to be dialogued and nuanced through learning, but not at the exclusion of what has been presented in this essay. So often I see students who are fatigued, who are attempting to fight hard battles personally and societally, often at the expense of hope and of mental and emotional health. One thing these students need, I suggest, are shared constructions of a world that can—because it does—include both what is wrong *and* what is right, what seems hopeless *and* what may not actually be. What these students need, I believe, and what I will continue to provide, is invitation into a space that includes a range of human emotions and experiences, of uptakes that sometimes contradict and need further working out, of a space that is expansive and experiential, narrativized and theorized, heard and spoken. What these students need, what *we all need*, if not a joy bubble, is—at minimum—an ever-expanding learning bubble that isn't afraid to be both inviting and inclusive of joy.

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CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

When I attempt to reflect upon the work contained in this dissertation, the first thing that comes to mind is how much further back I have to go than the year-and-a-half I've been writing this project. If I were to go back to when I first engaged the concept of life writing, I'd go back four years. If I were to go back to when I first engaged Donald Murray, I'd go back six years. If I were to go back to when I first engaged highly sensitive temperament, I'd go back either nine years or, if we're talking experientially, over three decades.

But where I choose to begin this conclusion is not at the earliest years listed, or of this dissertation. Instead, I begin when my attending a life writing class intersected with my first attempt to write life writing pedagogy. This was the fall of 2017, some two-and-a-half years ago. I was in the final semester of classes as a Ph.D. student. I was writing my final project for Amy Robillard's life writing course. And, though it wasn't explicit in my mind, the two ideas that compelled me to attend Illinois State University—that there was life writing under the rhetoric and composition umbrella and that the University itself was pedagogically focused, with a required chapter on pedagogy in the English Studies dissertation—were playing out in front of me. In the upcoming fall, I would teach an Advanced Composition course on “Bearing Witness through Life Writing,” which was thought to be the pedagogy chapter for my upcoming dissertation (in reality, two-thirds of this dissertation would become IRB-based, theoretically structured, experientially performed, pedagogy chapters). Yet, even before the pedagogy chapters featured in this dissertation, there was the article I wrote at the end of that life writing course, “Can I Be/Get a Witness: An Open Letter to the Life Writing Students I've Not Yet Met.” That article served as the initial construction of the affective-relational pedagogy that became the thread that most clearly runs through the chapters that make up this dissertation.

The affective-relational pedagogy, as it is put forth in “Can I Be/Get a Witness: An Open Letter to the Life Writing Students I’ve Not Yet Met,” is quoted explicitly in chapters 2 and 3, and it is referred back to in chapter 4. In fact, had I not sent that aforementioned article to *Writing on the Edge* two years ago, I could see a version of it sitting between the chapters on Donald Murray and “Developing an Affective-Relational Pedagogy” in this dissertation. That article, though not featured in its entirety here, served as the predecessor and then companion piece to what became chapter 3 in this dissertation, “Developing an Affective-Relational Pedagogy: Teaching Advanced Composition as Bearing Witness through Life Writing.” Because this article on pedagogy informed the pedagogical experience that went on to inform the entirety of the dissertation, one doesn’t have to look any further than the first paragraph of “Developing an Affective-Relational Pedagogy” to locate the goal of this dissertation. It is right there, when I write that, “In my six years as a rhetoric and composition scholar, one of my approaches to scholarship has been an attempt to bring attention to pedagogy that involves both the external and internal realities of being human, without simply collapsing one into the other” (49). This approach, sometimes counterintuitive, sometimes paradoxical, was designed, over time, through teaching and witnessing student need, with one hope in mind: to help students collaborate on what is rhetorically and affectively urgent to them, combined with what the instructor and fellow students bring to the experience, in order to locate, develop, and write to *and* through that urgency wherever it may be and wherever it may go. This pedagogical line of thought is parallel to that of Dee Fink’s when he writes that, too often, the classroom space doesn’t allow students to connect their “course files” to the their “life files” and vice versa (7). The concepts of “course files” and “life files” are inclusive of an affective-relational pedagogy, but they still leave space for further explanation. When we write about a “life file,” for instance, do we mean the events of

a student's life that happen outside of the classroom space? Sure, we do. However, for some, this thought might bring up only that which is external, spatial in the world, shared explicitly with another human being. When we say, "life file," then, we must be explicit that what we mean is also inclusive of what happens within a student's concept of interiority. Not just a claim that this interiority is a reflection of the cultural and the social, but that some people, for reasons mentioned in this dissertation and likely some not, might pull more of their life files or more of the important ones, from the creative, imaginative, interior world that they've built and maintained. If we are inclusive of the second part, we then have to recognize that a student may well bring their "life file" to class, and it might be *this very aspect* that keeps them from paying attention, because what is discussed in the classroom space might continually be so far removed from what is happening within the brain within the body sitting in the chair that it has no local, individual recognition.

These are the thoughts, for me, that cue a life writing approach, sometimes explicitly (chapter 3) and sometimes implicitly (chapter 4). And, too, these are the thoughts that cause me to lay over that life writing approach with an affective relational pedagogy. When I refer to "life writing" here, I mean anything from a life writing course (one that might include the reading, writing, studying, and dialoguing of and about memoir and personal essay to any course that either privileges or simply allows in discussion and project work that which is personal, embodied, vulnerable, and inclusive of life story). In this regard, life writing is featured in the entirety of the chapter 3 course on "Developing an Affective-Relational Pedagogy," as well as the unit 3 approach from chapter 4 when I ask my joy students to perform a project that tells a story from their lives that touches affectively on some aspect of a negative nuclear script and at least one joy narrative.

As for the affective relational aspect of my pedagogy, it is important to note the transformational potential when blending experiential and theoretical, not just for reader but for author. Over the last three years, this pedagogy, and my understanding of it, has evolved from the time I constructed it pre-teaching, to how it evolved after teaching it, to how it continued to evolve throughout the process of writing this dissertation. Originally, as stated in chapter 3, I chose the terms “affect” and “relational” to try to capture multiple perspectives in my pedagogy. Towards this aim, I write:

My pedagogy, which I first called *the pedagogy of giving a shit* and now call an *affective-relational pedagogy*, centers on neither of the two binary choices we are sometimes given—individual/isolated or social/political. Instead, an affective-relational pedagogy is dialogical and posits that we are always in relation, both to the world beyond ourselves (our classmates, instructors, reading materials, friends, family, and greater social/political contexts) as well as to our interior lives (the conversations we have by ourselves, with ourselves, with imaginal others).

Two points are noteworthy here. The first is, when I originally wrote this paragraph and even deep into the dissertation process, there was no mention of “imaginal others.” That concept came to be while I was attempting to justify why, in five years of teaching a conflict letter to undergraduate students, I’ve never encountered a student who felt like the rhetorical and affective force of choosing someone to write their letter to would be lessened by knowing they’d likely never actually send the letter. It was here that I encountered the article, “Opposites in a Dialogical Self: Constructs as Characters,” and the quote I share in chapter 3, stated here, speaks to one of the reasons why I believe this is so:

In an extensive discussion of the role of ‘invisible guests’ in the self, Watkins (1986) argued that in most psychological theories, imaginal phenomena are most often approached from the perspective of the real. Ontological priority is clearly given to the existence of the real others and to ‘reality’ in general, whereas imaginal others are typically seen as derivative from and subordinate to this ‘objective’ reality. Nevertheless, our daily lives are filled with imaginal dialogues. Taking place alongside actual dialogues with real others and interwoven with them, they constitute a central part of our narrative construction. (7)

This quote is important because this is where my own thinking and pedagogy gets challenged by teaching and writing about it. In the initial work, simply wanting to be inclusive of individual, interior states of being, I carried over a bit of a binary myself. For me, in originally creating an affective relational pedagogy, the relational would be the explicit aspect of the pedagogy that captures the external, captures the social and cultural, captures the familial, captures bearing witness in the classroom space. It would be the affective, with what we feel in those moments and how we often take them up introspectively, that would allow for spotlighting the often under-theorized personal/internal. While these concepts are still true—meaning they create space for all of these factors—I now realize that, originally, I had restrained one area (the external) from another (the internal) in a way that still needed to be complicated. Part of this expansion of my theory came through writing chapter 2 on Donald Murray, which I will touch on soon, and realizing how much of his so-called isolated imaginative time, locked away with life writing, spoke not just to the imaginative in others but explicitly to their external worlds and how they lived their lives.

While this lesson may seem small, it plays out in two important ways in the work of this dissertation. The first is within the variety of student topic choices featured in this dissertation and the second is in my own affective-relational uptake from chapter 2. Towards this first aspect, student topic choices, it might seem inevitable that students would become confused and overwhelmed in a class where some students were frontloading personal experiences while others were focused on societal issues while still others were focused on that which is familial. Indeed, it is possible for this to become confusing or overwhelming. It is also possible, however, as chapter 3 demonstrates, for students to take up a variety of topics, from a variety of perspectives, for a variety of reasons, and still have enough commonality in the classroom space (through explicit terminology, through bearing witness, through reading and dialoguing memoir and personal essay, through listening to one another's writing and reasoning) to be able to speak to each approach. And while it is true that it takes pedagogical intention to allow this happen, I am also coming to realize, as I'm referencing here, that sometimes *more complicated* is *more simple* because it is representative of human beings who are more complicated *than* simple.

As example of the variety of choices and reasons from students in chapter 3, I highlight a student who wrote about her relationship with her Nana, who has passed away. Her focus is primarily personal and internal, with a familial relational lens accompanying it. I also highlight a student who, in identifying as transgender, fears what their initial teaching experience might be like. This is also personal, but it is accompanied closely by a social and cultural lens. Still another student wrote about her mother as a dragon. Such was her work, her focus on her mother even beyond her own self, that I would say that the focus on the mother comes first, and thus it is familial relational, accompanied secondarily by a personal and internal lens. As mentioned, in theory, this all could become confusing for one space, but because we defined bearing witness

through the words of Leslie Jamison, who challenges us to ““enter another person’s pain as [we’d] enter another country, through immigration and customs, border crossing by way of query: *What grows where you are? What are the laws? What animals graze there?*” (“Can I” 2), and because I explicitly hunched that the more we approach the life stories of others with questions instead of answers, with permission instead of demands, with awe and wonder instead of insufferable know-it-all-ness, the more we would approach our own selves, our own stories, and our own lives with questions, permission, wonder and awe, and vice-versa, I believe the students in that course demonstrated that they were capable of finding their own urgency through a lens of their own choosing, while simultaneously bearing witness to 17 other urgencies, differently placed. After all, simply because one’s point of focus today is primarily social-cultural, doesn’t mean that it won’t be internal or familial tomorrow. Or maybe it was yesterday. In this regard, it is not separate spaces, unaffected, that we are referencing but, instead, where we are placing the primary weight and focus of what we choose to write, research, and approach in a moment in time.

Secondly, as mentioned, in writing this dissertation, I ended up impacted by the very pedagogy I sought to put forth. After writing chapters 2-4, after editing, I still found myself being asked to bring more of my personal story into chapter 2 on Donald Murray and life writing. One night, somewhere between 12 and 6 a.m., I reread that chapter on Murray and added two paragraphs to the conclusion. They were meant to be my tribute to Murray. They were meant to be my *reason why* when it came to a second article on a man that some have likely forgotten, and others never even knew. After reading the article, I went straight to the computer to type up a felt response, which includes the following:

when I was so fearful that I would never articulate and theorize what it is that I am (highly sensitive? introverted?), and while seeking capital in our culture made me believe that until I could articulate and theorize what I am then I am really nothing at all, I woke up one day and realized I've already become, already am, what I sought to be all along. And this is how it happened as far as I can tell: I read and was moved by the words of a Donald Murray who lived from 1924 to 2006; I developed and fostered a relationship with an Imaginal Murray; from the relationship with that Imaginal Murray, I developed an Imaginal Me, who, over time, I now realize I've stepped into and become. (42)

It would be painful to convey how many years I sought some direct transfer from the imaginative interior of another to my own, one that would allow me to write something about my identity that would be validated by somebody enough to make me feel like I could officially be who I sought to be. This failed equation, I now believe, is because of its lack of an eye for what was going on in my external, social reality. It wasn't until writing about Murray, focusing on the experiential and practical, that I saw the line from Imaginal Other to socialized version of me, when I wrote in admission and realization that:

Like Murray, I am, first and foremost, a practitioner. I am a doer of the experiential. These days, when I stand in the classroom and tell my students I'm an introvert, they laugh in disbelief. When I tell them I am highly sensitive, they look at me sideways. Yet, none of this is due to my being any less introverted or highly sensitive. It is because, just as Murray found an indirect relational through his life writing, I have found an indirect relational through my life writing *classes*. In the classroom, I am social and relational, and I don't even recognize it. I don't

recognize it because, in these classrooms, we build a kind of social and relational that theory has told us for thirty years cannot be: one that is not divided but is further captured and encapsulated by a room full of individual interiorities bearing witness to a collective imagination that makes me feel as if I have escaped into a favorite book. (42)

As I wrote this, I knew its truth in the way that, once you hear certain things, you feel as if you've always known them in some faraway manner. And what is most important here, I believe, is the reason why it was so difficult to make this transfer: I had become so adverse to putting the internal in context with the external because, to me, those around me often seemed to privilege the external as actor upon the internal—with no rhetorical or affective space for what goes on in private, in the imaginative, why some prefer the world built there, and how what goes on in the imaginative might serve as pushback to specific external spaces. Such was my frustration, that I took up the opposite problem, privileging the internal to the exclusion of the external. Because people called Murray's internal work isolated, I tried to take it up imagination to imagination, not seeing that Murray's internal work, made manifest through his writing, had impacted me successfully already, particularly in the place of who I am and how I am in the social, external world, specifically the classroom. Even as I had this struggle and was producing this binary, I had the goal of presenting the widest possible relational pedagogy I could. This realization demonstrates to me that, even in the best of our intentions, we must continually check for what we are leaving out or undervaluing in our pedagogical stances.

That this pedagogy could get so close to me that it transforms my way of thinking about it, about myself, implores me to ask, when a teacher gets close enough to their pedagogy to be changed by it and a scholar writes close enough to their pedagogy to be changed before the

process ends, is that close enough to fulfilling the call put forth in the introduction to this dissertation, in Art Bochner's push against equating "knowing exclusively with seeing from a distance?" (138). Moreover, does it answer Bochner's call for "multiple forms of representation and research; away from facts and towards meanings; away from master narratives and toward local stories; away from idolizing categorical thought and abstracted theory and toward embracing the values of... emotionality, and activism; away from assuming the stance of disinterested spectator and toward assuming the position of a feeling, embodied, and vulnerable observer; away from writing essays and toward telling stories" (134-135).

I'd like to think it's a start.

The one aspect that I envisioned, however, that will *not* be realized in this dissertation is one additional chapter—a final chapter—where I focus on ongoing uptake documents in the classroom and how, combined with an ongoing affective relational pedagogy, they bring forth a kind of assessment explicit to the ongoing, dialogical nature of both aspects. Simply put, time did not permit this chapter, and the closest I come in the dissertation, is to borrow assessment goals from "Dialogue on Dialogic Pedagogy," where Matusov and Miyazaki put forth an assessment where:

[T]he learning process has an intrinsic value in itself and can be viewed positively as pleasure; interesting challenge (including even frustration and pain); "curious wonder" (Taylor, 1968); deep, bottomless, unfinalized understanding; dialogic relationship with important others; growth; life itself; creativity; becoming somebody different; experiential; eventful (even at times through dramatic, painful, and tragic events); relational, valuing others;

situational, ill-defined; immeasurable; not limited in time and space; unfinalized; and so on. (4)

In this same chapter where I include this assessment, I make clear my reasoning for using it: “I borrow from this passage on ontological dialogical pedagogy because, even as I continue to structure my own dialogic stances in an affective relational pedagogy, Matusov and Miyazaki are ahead of me in creating a vast, wonderful, specified list of assessment criteria that is applicable to the work I do in a life writing space but that I’ve yet to specify so clearly” (62). While the assessment criteria listed here is close enough to serve in regards to the work highlighted in this dissertation, I still believe important discoveries concerning this pedagogy will be uncovered once I write this additional essay.

As an academic, it is too easy to always feel behind, and there is a lens here in which I could easily feel that way. However, it is also true, as I stated in the beginning of this conclusion, that writing specifically about life writing from the classroom took me four years, writing the chapter on Murray took six years, and high sensitivity has been with me for the entirety of my life. It is imperative, then, in forwarding an approach to academic life that values experiential reality and is inclusive of joy, that I continue to live my own words while performing academic life. In this regard, not only do I know the chapter on uptake and affective relational pedagogy will come but, upon graduation from Illinois State University, I find myself beginning work at a University whose English department, in my first year, will be concentrating their efforts on reimagining their assessment. This is an example of how, when one is inclusive of the experiential and a joy lens, how we feel, think, and function can all be transformed. With inclusion of the experiential and of joy, my focus goes from the too-often sense of always feeling

behind to understanding that the work of this dissertation actually positions me to be right on time for what is next to come.

Finally, in closing, I end by echoing calls I made throughout this dissertation, from the introduction through the chapters that followed. First and foremost, whether one's particular pedagogy would thrive with such broad affective and relational parameters or not, I hope the reader at least comes to better appreciate a need for such parameters in our spaces at large. All of the time, our lives are being affected and are affecting the personal, individual, relational, familial, cultural and societal aspects of what it means to be alive. Urgencies change but these functions remain relevant and necessary.

For life writers and teachers of life writing pedagogy, especially in the rhetoric and composition tent, I truly believe we need to explicitly network, research, and communicate in ways that makes broadly known the legitimacy and necessity of the work that we do.

For those who would invite joy into the classroom, I hope you continue to problematize it according to what you know, who you are, and what you've experienced. But I also hope you will allow parameters inclusive of a large body of work that, if enough people feel welcomed, could create a legitimate joy studies space in the English field.

And, finally, for whoever reads this text, I hope you have asked yourself the questions of an affective relational pedagogy: *What is prompting me and why? Which parts stood out to me in a first read? Which should I revisit?* To you I offer the invitation I offered the Imaginal Donald Murray at the conclusion of chapter 2. Ultimately, like a dressing room, we choose to take some things with us and leave some behind, and that is okay. So, give yourself permission to try on the narratives, pedagogies, and approaches of this dissertation. And, if you are feeling particularly

brave or experimental today, feel free to reach first for what might be *most* outside your normalized narrative attire.

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