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Masters Portfolio

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That's Not All She Wrote

I have lived my life volleying between what I believed were diametrically opposed passions- people and academia. Nothing illustrates this so well as my career beginning in college. Originally, I started my undergraduate studies in pursuit of social work; this was the empathetic Emily. Eventually, I switched to studying English and Spanish with a focus on literary studies. This was the intellectual Emily. Once I graduated, I began working at a bank and teaching part-time at a technical college as I struggled to decide which self I wanted to embrace for 40 hours each week. When I landed a full-time job teaching developmental reading and writing at the same institution, empathetic Emily made a full comeback for good. Or so I thought, at least until I decided, through a unique blend of *carpe diem* and collegial coercion, to apply to Bowling Green's graduate program in English with a Specialization in Teaching. I would like to say that this program will significantly impact my students, but I can only selfishly say that the impact on my students will be secondary to the impact this program had on me – as a student, a teacher, and a person. My graduate studies have offered me a rigorous program of intellectual stimulation and self-actualization, and the texts included in this portfolio offer evidence of the changes marked in me.

The first project I chose to include in my portfolio, "Roots," is significant because it details an early change in my career path, when I decided I wanted to work in higher education. Originally written for Dr. Lee Nickoson's Teaching of Writing course, this assignment asked us to critically explore our most influential experiences with writing and the teaching of writing. Until brainstorming for my essay, I had never truly appreciated the impact made by my tutoring job. I chose to revise this piece so that I could further reflect on the role this experience played in my

teaching practices today. In her feedback, many of Dr. Nickoson's comments asked me for more specific details and explanations. Drawing out these details as I revised was a necessary part of understanding the relationship between myself as a teacher and myself as a tutor. As so often seems to be the case, improving my writing simultaneously helped me improve my understanding of myself.

As a reflective narrative, this essay also holds a symbolic importance to me. The first time I wrote a narrative in a post-elementary academic setting was during my first semester at Bowling Green. In fact, the first significant writing assignment I had was in Dr. Nickoson's Graduate Writing course, and it was a narrative. This baffled me because I had never been taught to write in this way, and, by never teaching narrative, my composition teachers implicitly taught me that narrative has nothing to do with academic writing. In a classic case of a teacher teaching what she has been taught, I never taught my students narrative. In fact, I taught *against* it. So when I wrote my first narrative for Dr. Nickoson, it felt wrong, it felt uncomfortable, and, as is often the case when things feel wrong and uncomfortable, it felt wonderfully freeing. Old habits, however, don't die that easily. It took me the passage of one year, two of Dr. Nickoson's courses, and one of Dr. Carter-Wood's courses to really work through my modal prejudice. Now, I am proud to say that I see great value in and many uses for narrative, especially in rhetorical grammar and affective pedagogy. While "Roots" is not the first narrative I wrote, it – combined with its tribute to my beginnings – stands as a testament to the humility and open-mindedness that I found as a graduate student and must retain as a teacher.

The next project in my portfolio also represents a fundamental shift in me. I wrote the first version of "Hypotheses Non Fingo" for Dr. Erin Labbie's Theory and Methods of Literary Criticism. In my undergraduate days, I had always felt a special thrill with literary criticism, and Dr. Labbie's class proved no different. I loved it and recognized its importance, but I still struggled to see how it connected to that "other" part of myself, the compassionate, empathetic Emily who worked in the trenches. I began to again see theory as a guilty pleasure. Surely, I thought, Derrida's Pharmacy had no cure for my students. Fortunately, Dr. Labbie, together with heavy weight theorists like bell hooks and Michel Foucault, helped me understand that critical theory is not meant to be isolated from daily life. In fact, we are to reconcile what we learn through theory with our ways of living. This realization forced me to rethink my approach to my education, my job, and ultimately my way of life. Instead of further dividing my intellectual self from the part of me that is committed to compassion and social justice, theory helped me understand how to connect the two.

"Hypotheses Non Fingo," as the culmination of my work in Dr. Labbie's class, articulates this understanding, which makes its inclusion in my portfolio an absolute necessity. In it, I explore the intersection of literature, language, culture, and power – basically a dynamic cocktail of my favorite ingredients. I revised the original to include more of Derrida's work on structure, both because Dr. Labbie suggested I do so and because I wanted to challenge myself. Despite my growth, my fear remains that the more scholarly my work feels, the less relevant it will be. I am excited to continue working against this anxiety because work like "Hypotheses Non Fingo" has huge implications for me, particularly for my career. Critical work like this allows me to examine how language includes and excludes, and this is makes a powerful application

to the world of education. I can see the phenomena of my essay unfolding in culture and in the classroom. And I have questioned my role in all of this. If I am not doing any of this, if I am ignoring the possibilities that literary theory unfolds for my job, I am not truly serving my students. My course in literary theory began this work, but ultimately my entire two years in graduate school has challenged me to radically rethink my role as a teacher.

Further proof of this comes in my third project: "Reaching Up for the 'Oughtness'." Like "Hypotheses Non Fingo," this essay also explores language and power, but it addresses the field of education much more specifically. The original assignment was a two-page reading response paper from Dr. Sheri Wells-Jensen's Introduction to Linguistics course. Over the six weeks of her (summer) course, students were to read four books and subsequently write a paper for each novel. One of the novels I selected was John Baugh's *Out of the Mouths of Slaves*. I chose to revise the essay I wrote on Baugh's text for the same reasons I chose to read his text in the first place. I have seen firsthand the ways in which our educational system has neglected or harmed many of my students, a painful reality. Equally painful, however, is the feeling of helplessness with which I have always approached the issue of prejudice and education. When I revisited this essay, I wanted to change this, and I took direction from one of Dr. Wells-Jensen's comments that I should find "some hope." I did so in the best way I know how: to look to fellow teachers who have found ways to successfully approach the issue. In this way, I transcended my original goal of simply informing myself to arming myself with practical change-making strategies.

I included this essay as my teaching-based project because I firmly stand with Constance Weaver's belief that, as English teachers, it is our obligation to understand, confront, discuss, and address issues of language and power both in our classroom and in the system that we

have inherited. I believe that these issues should be as present in our pedagogy as any subject matter and can be productively taught with literature, composition, grammar, linguistics, or reading. The common approach taken that subverts or ignores these issues does not serve our students well, and neither does the approach that places them on the proverbial "back-burner." This is especially considering that issues such as linguistic prejudice frequently are lost or forgotten in the urgency of the moment. My research has illustrated the severity of this situation and the gravity of my own responsibility as a teacher. Examining best practices has given me much hope, but it has also given me much to do as I set out to rethink the way that I design my own curriculum.

The final revision included in this portfolio also indicates an area in which I have much work to do. My essay titled "The Road Less – or Is it Fewer? – Traveled" is my substantive research and analysis piece, and it is also the start of what will be a career-long journey. I began this essay as my final project for Dr. Sue Carter Wood's Teaching Grammar in the Context of Writing course. Its first iteration was a quest to defend the legitimacy of the "counter tradition" in grammar pedagogy through research. After revisiting my work, however, I realized that I needed to add more research proving not only the inefficacy of traditional school grammar, but also the efficacy of teaching grammar in the context of writing. As I worked to do this, I found that libraries and journals were not overflowing with such material. While all of my research was telling me that the counter tradition has existed for at least a century, its pulse in published literature is still barely detectable. My first reaction – being the kindhearted soul I am – was to be indignantly annoyed with my colleagues who are teaching rhetorical grammar but not talking about it. And then I remembered that I am a teacher.

This is when I realized that I need to join the voices of teachers who are implementing best practices and seeing success. It's also when I realized that my role as a researcher does not end when I finish graduate school, and it's not as one-dimensional as I thought. Before this project, I had only ever conceptualized myself as a researcher in that I culled pools of data, never the creator but always the critic. I had never envisioned myself capturing my own data, but now I have can't see myself being satisfied without becoming a teacher-researcher. My curiosity has been piqued, my passion lit, and now my husband is truly afraid that I really will never have free time again. In all honesty, though, this is yet another instance in which my studies at Bowling Green have reshaped my conception of what it means to be a teacher. I've always known that teaching is about advocacy, but never quite had the tools. Research is one tool, at an institutional and collegial level, that is vital to the work of advocating effectively for students and for equitable instruction. In this way, this seemingly simple project revolutionized both my teaching practices when it comes to grammar and my role as a teacher.

Reflecting on my personal and intellectual gains from my time in graduate school brings that strange sadness we feel when we mourn the loss of years lived incompletely. Before enrolling at Bowling Green, I did not believe that the elements I felt essential to my fulfilment could coexist, much less work in concert. I had resigned myself instead to a life of opposition, of partial fulfilment dictated by my own hard choice. Either I would live a compassionate life mostly void of intellectual stimulation, or I would live a cold, academic life. Within one semester, graduate school began to dissolve this dichotomy, replacing it instead with a beautiful marriage of my strengths. This portfolio represents this discovery and re-discovery over the past two years. It represents the work I have done, but more so the work I need to

keep doing. Specifically, I need to maintain my humility, my open mind, and my curiosity. I need to build my repertoire of equitable pedagogy, and I need to contribute as a teacher-researcher. I keep these revisions as talismans of my growth at each moment – as a student, as a teacher, as a person. Together they illustrate the trajectory of my studies: I have learned to live more completely, but I'm nowhere near complete.

Roots: The True Value of a Part Time, On-Campus Job

My life as a writer was, for a long time, characterized by a strange paradox. On one end of this paradox, I was always good at writing. I learned to write around the age of three when I learned to read, and so I entered kindergarten writing full sentences. While my classmates learned the alphabet, I wrote journal entries and staple-bound books. As I progressed in school, I consistently earned high grades, won awards, and generally skated through my English classes. By the time I got to college, I had it pretty figured out that writing was just my "thing." One of my professors confirmed this several weeks into my first semester when he, the director of the campus Writing Lab, asked me to consider becoming a writing tutor. While the eternally self-critical part of me was surprised, I had to admit that the offer to become a writing tutor fit squarely into my history; after all, I imagined that this was the type of thing that happened to "good" writers. As the time for my tutor training approached and I began anticipating the job requirements, however, I realized something that sent me into a tailspin. Here is where the paradox comes in: I was always good at writing, but I never actually knew *how* to write.

While I am sure that, perhaps hidden in the dusty coils of my brain, I had some knowledge about the process of writing, I certainly would not have been able to articulate this knowledge. Frankly, I do not remember ever learning how to write in school. Sure, I can remember my English classes, but the lessons I recall learning include grammar activities, spelling tests, and good old hamburger essay structure. In other words, I learned what to write. Learning how to write, on the other hand, is an entirely different matter. It is also something that seems to be completely missing from my memory of primary and secondary education. I wrote my way through these years without having the slightest clue as to what I was doing well

or why it was working for me. I remember once, in my sophomore composition class, getting a paper back. When I saw that it was brandished with a *100%* and an enthusiastic *Excellent!*, I laughed and told a friend that I had no clue why I got such a good grade. Experiences like this, repeated over many years, shaped my view of writing. To me, the ability to write well was a mystical gift, more of a genetic trait than a learned process– either you have it and you are lucky, or you don't and you become an accountant.

So this is why I sat, on the first day of my tutor training, facing my professor and new boss, feeling for all the world like a fraud. I had no idea what I was doing. Fortunately, Dr. Sutton (my boss) did. Each week he assigned me a myriad of readings that covered topics from writing center theory to composition pedagogy, and every Monday we would meet to discuss the readings. This was my first exposure to writing instruction, concrete explanations that finally illuminated the mystery of writing. I remember seeing Bean's hierarchy of concerns and feeling like I had just been given VIP access to a members-only club. In addition to enlightening me through rock star reading assignments, Dr. Sutton grilled me in mock tutoring sessions. I played the role of "writing tutor" while he assumed a new student role each session – the shy no-talker, the recalcitrant my-teacher-made-me-come, the coaxing answer-fisher, the ELL learner. It bears mentioning here that Dr. Sutton is well-versed in theater, and that the student essays he used were brutal exercises in despair. These sessions were intense (I only cried once), but they were also instrumental in my growth as a writer and a tutor. They forced me to wrestle with the inner workings of writing and writers, and this showed me that, although writing *has* a mystical power, the ability to write is not itself a power bestowed upon us at birth. Once I realized this, I wanted to share it with everyone.

From the moment I met with my first student, I approached tutoring with the enthusiasm of a new convert. I had found redemption in the gospel of rhetoric: strategies and maneuvers that helped make the work of writing transparent. I wanted to empower my peers with this knowledge the same way it had empowered me, if not to change their lives (as I felt it did for me) then at least to improve their writing. During each tutoring session, I worked to draw students to a meaningful understanding of themselves as writers. And, in an unexpected turn of events, each session I came to a more meaningful understanding of myself as a writer. In five to ten minutes of reading a student's essay, I would calculate its strengths and prioritize its needs, determining the ways in which I would help the writer. As soon as I engaged the writer in conversation, however, the learning began for both of us. Here in this conversation is where I learned about the fickle space between reader and writer, the capricious ways that language can shape meaning, and everything in between. When I asked students to reflect on their writing process, I realized that I needed to change my own process. When I helped students build an argument, I began to build better arguments. When I talked about word choice, I reminded myself of the power of words. My conversations with my peers gave life to the world of writing, challenging me to push myself and grow.

These sessions also revealed the human element of writing to me. I quickly learned that not all students shared my *joie de vivre* when it came to composition. Many students shared my early views of writing as a natural-born talent, but very few of them shared my experience of being labeled a "good" writer. Often, they saw writing as a daunting task and their writing classes as a walk down bad-memory lane; attacking them with instant excitement would have probably done more harm than good. Instead, I learned the significance of trust in a tutoring

exchange and the importance of building rapport with students. I also learned that writing

involves so much more than just academic skills. Before I knew to use the term "non-cognitive,"

I was helping students navigate issues like time management, fear, stress, culture shock,

organization, and, well, life. I was consistently humbled by students' willingness to, despite

their nerves, share their writing with me – a perfect stranger (who, let's face it, had a really

bizarre sense of style). In return, I felt responsible for offering them individualized writing

advice in a way that honored their experiences. No matter the case though, I wanted students

to know that they already possessed the ability to write well, and, equally as important, I hoped

for them to gain a sense of confidence and an appreciation for their own voice.

My job as a writing tutor was the first of my pursuits to encompass my greatest

passions: language and people. It was the deciding factor when I adjusted my plans from a

career in secondary education to one in higher education. And, once I found my career in higher

education, it helped inform my first moves as a teacher. My goals as a teacher are largely the

same as they were in the writing center: to help student writers gain autonomy as they develop

their own meaningful literacy. I still want to demystify the process of writing, give them tools,

and build their confidence. I've also taken many of the ways I work toward these goals from my

time as a tutor. As Neal Lerner says in his chapter on Writing Center Pedagogy, I too have

found that "effective practice in the writing center easily translates to effective practice for any

context in which teaching and learning writing might be taking place" (305). In the classroom, I

still need to listen carefully, to respond to my students as a reader, to allow my students to be

in charge of their writing, and I also push my students to "articulate meta-language about

whatever it is they're writing…to describe goals, intended readers, purpose,…and areas needing

revision" (Lerner 305). Although I thought tutoring inspired my career, for all intents and purposes, tutoring became my career.

Another aspect of my teaching that I credit to Dr. Sutton's Writing Center is my teaching style. My time spent hunched beside students at a round table has had a tremendous impact on the way I approach my classes. While there are no round tables in our college's classrooms, my goal to come alongside students remains. I see myself as "a guide rather than a sage" (303), facilitating class activities rather than lecturing (Lerner). While lectures have their place in small doses, I try to avoid handing down capital-K knowledge to my students. In the beginning of the semester, I use a lot of modeling, scaffolding, and examples with students, but as the semester progresses, the front of the classroom features less and less of me. Instead, I maximize on collaborative activities in which students interact with each other – discussions, think-pair-shares, jigsaws, think-alouds, one-minute papers. Again, the Writing Center taught me to believe in the power of conversation, that "interaction is at the heart of any act of writing" (Lerner 306). The point of student-focused activities is to create opportunities for this interaction and to engage students in the kind of "learning by doing that is essential to social theories of learning and the development of expertise" (Lerner 306). Likewise, the foundational elements of a tutoring session – trust, respect, kindness, validation – have become the foundational elements of my classroom.

Through some faulty advising and my 17-year-old inexperience, I ended up taking one of Dr. Sutton's Intro to Literature courses in my first semester of college. While this course ended up being a repeat credit (I had already taken it thorough a college-credit high school class), it ended up being the most productive and rewarding mistake of my life. Working as a writing

tutor changed me from being a "good" writer into a writer who pursued good writing, for myself and for others. It shaped my identity, teaching me pivotal lessons about language and people that would eventually form the tenets of my teaching philosophy. Truly, being a writing tutor is what led me to even needing a teaching philosophy in the first place. All of this testifies to Mr. Lerner's understatement that "the theories that have guided writing center pedagogy are also valuable outside of the walls of the writing center" (307). As I continue to learn about pedagogy and to adapt my teaching practices, I fully expect that the way I do things in the classroom will change. I want my students to leave my classroom knowing what writing means to them and how it may benefit them. I want them leaving feeling validated, confident, and ready, and my teaching will continue to be shaped by whatever practices or experiences help me achieve these goals. The influence of the Writing Center, however, will never leave me. I'm going with Victor Hugo's advice on this one: I may change my leaves, but I'm going to keep the roots of my teaching intact.

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Hypotheses Non Fingo: Derrida's *Pharmakon* as an Instrument of Erasure

Abstract

Percival Everett's *Erasure* tells the story of Thelonious "Monk" Ellison. Monk describes himself as an avant-garde writer, fisherman, son, brother, art-lover, and woodworker who also happens to be African-American. Monk, who claims to "hardly ever think about race," becomes increasingly frustrated with the academic community's cold reception of his writing and is incensed when he finds his novels in the "African-American Studies" section at Border's. This frustration mounts when he discovers a recent bestseller called *We's Lives In Da Ghetto,* which is lauded for its raw illustration of black life in America. In a fit of rage, Monk writes a novel called *My Pafology* (later renamed: *Fuck*). He sends the novel to his agent with the intent of expressing his disgust with the publishing world. Instead of registering his disgust, though, Random House offers Monk a hefty publishing deal. Suddenly, Monk finds himself achieving more success with his polemical satire than he ever found possible with the publication of his true work. With this brilliant twist of events, Everett builds on Derrida's concept of the *pharmakon* in his "Plato's Pharmacy." Applying Derrida's work to Everett's text reveals a disturbing view of writing as it resists the intentions of the author and interacts with social constructs.

Hypotheses Non Fingo: Derrida's *Pharmakon* as an Instrument of Erasure

Percival Everett's novel *Erasure* follows the story of its narrator, Thelonious "Monk" Ellison. Monk describes himself first and foremost as a "writer of fiction," and secondarily as "a son, a brother, a fisherman, an art-lover, and a woodworker' (Everett 1). He does not, however, define himself by his African-American ethnicity. In fact, he vehemently denies caring about race. He says that he "hardly ever think[s] about race," and when he does, it's only because he feels guilty for not thinking about it (Everett 2). He becomes frustrated, then, when his avant-garde writing meets with increasingly cold reception in the academic community, and he is told that his writing should focus more on race. This frustration mounts when Monk finds his published works at Border's bookstore, not in the "Literature" or "Contemporary Fiction" sections, but in a small section labeled "African-American Studies." Soon afterwards, he discovers a recent bestseller called *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* by an author named Juanita Mae Jenkins, who panders to crude racial stereotypes and gross generalizations (for which she is awarded countless accolades and a multi-million-dollar movie deal). Facing the juxtaposition of Jenkins' success with his own post-modern novel's rejection, Monk's frustration erupts into rage.

This rage gives way to a new novel, a biting parody that Everett includes, in its entirety, within the text of Monk's narration. Monk's novel, *My Pafology,* parodies books like *We's Lives in Da Ghetto* by replicating the plot and content of Richard Wright's *Native Son*. The result? A painfully executed satire that drips with bile. Monk's protagonist is Van Go Jenkins, a young criminal whose motto is: "The world be stinkin', so why not me?" (Everett 65). Van Go's narration is riddled with obscenity and stereotypical dialect. Even the chapter headings are

spelled phonetically as "won, too, tree, fo" and so forth. What's more, Van Go has "*fo* babies by four different mothers. He pays no child support, has no job, and no ambition" (Everett 260). By bitterly seizing every black stereotype and stretching them to their fullest extent, Monk seeks to release his pent-up frustration. He explains *My Pafology* as his fed-up reaction to all of the "shit that's published" (Everett 132). With this purpose in mind, he sends the text off to his agent, hoping for a vindicating rejection.

What Monk receives instead changes the course of *Erasure*. Rather than the rejection he anticipates, Random House offers Monk a $600,000 publishing deal. This, following some 17 rejections of his last serious work, comes as a major shock. The publisher's reasoning, however, is the real bombshell. The senior editor of Random House calls *My Pafology* "true to life," "important," and "magnificently raw and honest" (Everett 136). These three qualifiers could not be further from Monk's intentions in writing his ludicrous parody. But it gets worse. After accepting the deal, his novel quickly gains attention as he is invited to talk shows and sponsored in full-page news editorials. At the height of commercial exploitation, Random House even decides to time the novel's release with the Christmas holiday. The culmination of this hype comes when Monk is nominated for and eventually wins the prestigious- if not hilariously ambiguous- "Book Award." Rather than enjoying newfound fame and glory, Monk finds himself utterly destroyed. He laments, "My spirit could not have been more deflated. My feet felt leaden, my stomach hollow, my hands cold. Nothing could have been more frightening or objectionable to me" (Everett 238). Monk's horror indicates the violence that takes place in the radical disparity between his original intentions and their actual result- a phenomenon that Jacques Derrida explores at great length. Derrida's concept of writing as a *pharmakon* is key to

understanding what went wrong for Monk and what is so compelling about Everett's novel. By illustrating the duality and danger of writing, Derrida's *pharmakon* shows how an author's intentions can be thwarted by the nature of language, and Everett's novel illustrates how sociocultural forces become an accomplice in this betrayal.

To understand Derrida's concept of writing as it pertains to *Erasure*, we must first reach back to the origin of Derrida's analysis: the role of the *pharmakon* in Plato's *Phaedrus*. In *Phaedrus*, Plato unfolds a dialogue between Socrates and the young Phaedrus. Over the course of this conversation, the two discuss rhetoric and its differing forms, particularly those of speech and writing. Socrates recounts the mythic invention of writing in which the god Theuth- the inventor of arithmetic, the sciences, and writing- presents the Egyptian king, Thamus, with his inventions. Theuth boasts that writing is a remedy for poor memory, but Thamus disagrees, rejecting writing as a science. To Thamus, writing provokes forgetfulness rather than cure it. Writing, he says, is "a potion for jogging the memory not for remembering" (Plato 78). What's more, Thamus argues that writing gives only "the appearance of intelligence, not real intelligence" (Plato 78). Thus, Socrates reveals his position on writing: writing leads away from- not toward- the truth. In other words, he agrees with Thamus. He clarifies this when he says,

> There's something odd about writing…which makes it exactly like painting. The offspring of painting stands there as if alive, but if you ask them a question they maintain an aloof silence. It's the exact same as written words: you might think they were speaking as if they had some intelligence, but if you want an explanation of any of the things they're saying and you ask them about it, they just go on and on for ever giving the same piece of information. (Plato 79)

Writing is not only a farce, but it also cannot defend or explain itself. With this indictment,

Socrates goes on to compare writing to speech, aiming to illustrate the superiority of speech.

Reading Plato's *Phaedrus*, then, reveals Plato's belief that writing is an inferior and dangerous

"way of using words" (Plato 79). Seems fairly simple, right?

Derrida disagrees. And the basis of his disagreement brings us closer to understanding

what Everett's text achieves. In his essay, "Plato's Pharmacy," Derrida argues that we cannot

simply deduce a binary moral (writing bad, speech good) from Plato's story. In fact, "only a

blind or grossly insensitive reading could indeed have spread the rumors that Plato was simply

condemning the writer's activity. Nothing here is of a single piece" (Derrida 1699). Suggesting

that there is a lot more to *Phaedrus* than we may think, Derrida explains that, like any text,

Phaedrus is not a one-dimensional space from which we extract meaning. On the contrary, he

believes that a text is intricately woven in and around itself; it is a "web that envelops a web"

(1697). He goes further and says that a text "is not a text unless it hides from the first comer,

from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game" (Derrida 1697). What

he means here is that *Phaedrus* does more than simply send Plato's message; it weaves a web

of signification, evading direct or immediate interpretation. What we have instead of a

straightforward lesson is a chance to undo Plato's web, a chance Derrida is not about to waste.

In his unraveling of Plato's web, Derrida focuses on the concept of the *pharmakon*, the

Greek word Plato uses for "writing." According to Derrida, the word *pharmakon* means "drug:

the medicine and/or poison" (1701). The word first appears when Socrates compares the

written texts that Phaedrus carries to a *pharmakon*, a potion that seduces and leads him out of

the city. Derrida identifies the significance of this first instance when he says that "this

pharmakon, this 'medicine,' this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence" (1702). As soon as Plato introduces the *pharmakon* through Socrates' comparison, he invokes all of the word's duality, its electric possibility. The *pharmakon*, as either a remedy or a poison, carries with it both a connotation of good and of evil; as a result, we cannot conclude whether or not Socrates' comparison connotes admiration or admonition (Derrida 1702). This is no mistake of translation, either. Jacques de Ville, in his "Revisiting Plato's Pharmacy," emphasizes the importance of understanding that "for Derrida these different possibilities of translation are not simply a matter of ambiguity or polysemy, but of a word with no self-identical meaning" (321). In fact, Derrida tells us that the *pharmakon* is more than a simple ambiguity. The *pharmakon* is an "antisubstance itself: that which resists any philosopheme, indefinitely exceeding its bounds as nonidentity, nonessence, nonsubstance" (Derrida 1702).

He further extends this idea in his analysis of Socrates' myth. In the myth of Theuth and Thamus, we see for the first time "without indirection, without hidden mediation, without secret argumentation that writing is proposed, presented, and asserted as a *pharmakon*" (Derrida 1704). This, according to Derrida, is where it gets good. Theuth presents writing to the Egyptian king as a potion or remedy for the memory and knowledge, but Thamus asserts that writing will have the opposite effect as it is poisonous. In other words, Theuth offers writing positively as a *pharmakon*, and Thamus rejects writing for the very reason that it *is* a *pharmakon*. Plato thus presents the *pharmakon* at once as "both remedy and poison," relying on the word to demonstrate both polarities of its meaning (de Ville 325). This duality does not serve Plato well, however, as he attempts to demonstrate that writing is inferior to speech. If

writing is inferior, then it would have to be more poison than remedy- certainly not both. And yet it seems that Plato's agenda seeks to prove writing as poisonous. Derrida points to this aspect of the *Phaedrus* as proof of Plato's attempt to "force the *pharmakon*" into a dichotomy (325), moving on to illustrate the futility of any such attempt.

Whatever Plato's intentions were, the *pharmakon* had its own plan in mind. Here, with deft analysis, Derrida reveals the true nature of the *pharmakon*:

> The word *pharmakon* is caught in a chain of significations. The play of that chain seems systematic. But the system here is not, simply, that of the intentions of an author who goes by the name of Plato. The system is not primarily what someone meant-to-say. Finely regulated communications are established through the play of language, among diverse functions of the word and, within it, among diverse strata and regions of culture. (1714)

Plato may have intended to establish a hierarchy on which speech was superior to writing, but the very tool that Plato uses to establish his argument betrays him. If we take our cues from Derrida, the varying and conflicting meanings held within the word *pharmakon* prevent Plato from bending it to his will. This means that there is a lot more to *Phaedrus* than Plato's message, and we can attribute this "something more" to the nature of language. To Derrida, "textuality [is] constituted by differences and by differences from differences, it is by nature absolutely heterogeneous and is constantly composing with the forces that tend to annihilate it" (1715). Writing as a *pharmakon* is composed of conflicting differences, differences that make meaning and destroy it. Adopting Derrida's *pharmakon* means that writing ceases to be a reliable form of communication and takes on a life of its own. Language "gives rise to a

structure of replacements such that all presences will be supplements substituted for the absent origin and all differences, within the system of presence, will be the irreducible effect of what remains [beyond beingness or presence]" (Derrida 1732). It follows, then, that the "origin" of Plato's *Phaedrus*, his purpose or intent, became the *pharmakon* as soon as he wrote it. Herein lies the duality of writing, where Derrida's concept of the *phamakon* intersects with Everett's text.

Understanding Derrida's concept of the *pharmakon* allows us to see language at work in *Erasure*. While Monk's intentions are clear when he sets out to write *My Pafology*, these intentions lose all significance as soon as the novel falls into other hands. What he creates as a seething indictment of cultural racism becomes, somewhere in its own "web of signification," a tribute to black life in America. The system at work in *My Pafology* has nothing to do with Monk's "meant-to-say" and everything to do with "the play of language" (Derrida 1729). It is this play of language that Monk's agent fears when he says, "This thing scares me" (Everett 133). This is also the same possibility that Monk dismisses when he says, in words that echo throughout the rest of the book, "If they can't see it's a parody, fuck them" (Everett 133). Not long after making this statement, Monk discovers that "they" indeed cannot see that it is a parody. Textuality takes Monk's meaning and leads it astray, so far astray that it performs a violent reversal on his text- from satire to serious account. This is the power of the *pharmakon*.

It is this same power that Derrida exposes: the *pharmakon* at once means writing is both slippery and powerful. To illustrate this, Derrida emphasizes the moment when, within Plato's text, Socrates is lured outside of city walls by the book that Phaedrus carries. Derrida explains: "only words that are deferred, reserved, enveloped, rolled up, words that force one to

wait for them in the form and under cover of a solid object" can remove Socrates from his

routine, safe within the city (1702). Writing as *pharmakon* has the power to go or lead astray,

as it does with both Socrates and Monk's novel (Derrida 1702). It thus has a nature of its own: a

nature we can neither define nor resist. When combined with the power to dodge intentions,

this power becomes dangerous. The *pharmakon*, then, is a seductive, self-governing force that

disrupts any notion of certainty. Monk makes a fatal mistake when he, feeling certain that his

text will be read as a dark parody, sends off his draft of *My Pafology.* Like Phaedrus's scroll,

Monk's text holds the power to lead its reader far away from his purpose, from safety. This

concept of writing introduces a little chaos into the system of rhetoric, and it is also

fundamental to Everett's work.

Everett is not shy about his concern with writing, either. Interspersed with the narration

of his novel's drama, Monk muses about writing throughout *Erasure.* In one especially

representative instance, Monk's thoughts wax Derridean. He says, "It's incredible that a

sentence is ever understood. Mere sounds strung together by some agent attempting to mean

some thing, but the meaning need not and does not confine itself to that intention" (Everett

44). He goes on to say, "Those sounds, strung as they are in their peculiar order, never change,

but do nothing but change" (Everett 44). Here Monk nods to the same concept of the

heterogeneity inherent to writing that Derrida explains in his essay, "Structure, Sign, and Play in

the Discourse of the Human Sciences." According to Derrida, once language entered the

"universal problematic," it changed the way we conceptualize language. The process of

signification no longer relies on the rule of a centered structure: the signified and its sign.

Instead, the sign is not a "fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite

number of sign-substitutions come into play" (Derrida 2). The process of signification is thus "a

system where the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely

present outside a system of differences" (Derrida 2). In Monk's words, when we create

language, we string signs together intending to forge meaning, but meaning- the signified- is

never stable. In fact, meaning is always changing. The absence of a "transcendental signified"

opens language to free play, an infinite possibility of meanings and interpretations, or, as in

Monk's case, of misinterpretations.

Monk's musings on language indicate his respect for the infinite possibility that

language holds. Recognizing the capricious nature of meaning, he writes: "Even if grammatical

recognitions are crude, meaning is present. Even if the words are utterly confusing, meaning is

present. Even if the semantic relationships are only general or categorical. Even if the language

is unknown" (Everett 44). Meaning, however, does not correspond with intention. Instead,

"meaning is internal, external, orbital, but still there is no such thing as propositional content.

Language never really effaces its own presence, but creates the illusion that it does in cases

where meaning presumes a first priority" (Everett 44). What this means is that, even if the

reader is oblivious to the author's satire, meaning is present. And Monk- riffing off of Derrida-

knows that this meaning can be external to the text. What he seems to forget in writing his

parody, however, is that language is not the only force at play for his readers. The unraveling of

Monk's intentions has much to do with Derrida's *pharmakon*, but it has more to do with the

pharmakon as it meets with sociocultural forces - beliefs, prejudices, stereotypes, and racism.

The role of the *pharmakon* in *Erasure* illustrates the subversive power of writing as it

interacts with cultural tendencies and mass media. In his essay "Van Go's *Pharmakon*:

'Pharmacology' and Democracy in Percival Everett's *Erasure*," Chauncey Ridley notes that "what

sells for Monk is not even the novel that he set out to sell. Instead, what sells is "the

commercial erasure of its parody" (Ridley 102). In a move that seems to confirm Ridley's point,

Monk renames his novel *Fuck*. When America's top literary critics name *Fuck* a triumph of

realism rather than a parody, the meaning ascribed to Monk's text erases his original

intentions. While pointing back toward Derrida, this erasure is symptomatic of a larger issue.

And Ridley names the issue nicely: "Twenty-first century democracy is in a sorry state.

Impervious to reason and oblivious to parody, it still needs its bestial black fix and will have it,

irrespective of the true diversity and complexity of black literature and identity" (103). Everett

shows this sorry state by emphasizing "misreading as a means by which mass media co-opts

black literature" (Ridley 103). This misreading comes largely from a desire to read, and thus

perpetuate, the stereotypes that are deeply rooted in our culture- a phenomenon that Ridley

equates to an addiction.

This addiction stems from society's need to relieve our racial anxiety. When the readers

of *Fuck* misread it as "true black experience," they perpetuate a "subhuman stereotype" that is

"less about real black folk than about 'a nightmarish fantasy in the white mind'" (Ridley 104). As

racial lines progressively blur, those in power feel an increasing anxiety about the "proximity to

the racial other" (Ridley 104). In an attempt to suppress the approach of the "other," those at

the top of the hierarchy create a scapegoat, which, in this case, is the African-American. This is

done through language first and foremost, but "through language into law…social ethics and

manners… city planning and non-planning" (Ridley 104). Essentially, this characterization of the

racial scapegoat becomes engrained in the very constructs, both social and cultural, of our

society. The "dramatized demonization, pursuit, and restraint of the bestial black fetish have the power of ritual, insofar as they galvanize a collective rapture that sacrifices the substitution of the beast…for real black folk" (104). In other words, Monk's novel satiates the American appetite for brutal black stereotypes, the consumption of which only seems to intensify their hunger.

Instead of appeasing their hunger pains, Monk's postmodern literary work starves the societal craving for a stereotyped fix. With his "reworkings of Aeshchyles" and "parodies of the French poststructuralists," Monk breaks the hierarchal barrier and enters into scholarly conversation. His entrance, however, is thwarted by the essentialist force of commercial America when his books are placed in the African-American Studies section of Border's. When he eventually scribbles *Fuck* into existence, the racist appetite of his publisher erases his satire. This misreading, the insidious side of the *pharmakon*, also comes from a long tradition. Toni Morrison discusses the prevalence of black stereotypes in the white American canon in *Playing in the Dark.* She calls these literary stereotypes "traditionally useful constructs of blackness" (Ridley 106). Her use of the word "constructs" suggests an intentionality to the writing of these stereotypes, which authors deliver pragmatically. They serve to make "intellectual domination possible," and they do so "by evoking hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive 'othering'" of people and language" (Ridley 106). Cooperating with cultural anxieties over race and dominance, the literary "revelation" of these stereotypes has become "entrenched custom" (Ridley 107). The repetition of these stereotypes throughout literary history and over time lend them the appearance of truth, increasing the likeliness of their future production. As such, Monk's readers are accustomed to reading stereotypes based on

"negative homogeneity." They at once expect and accept them at the first read, rather than recognizing them as parody or anything else.

In the conclusion of his essay, Ridley refers to *Fuck* as "the twenty-first century descendent of Theuth's *pharmakon*" (109). As a *pharmakon*, Monk's novel breaks free of his intentions and turns on him, but the real danger of the *pharmakon* is how its ability to "lead astray" collides with sociocultural forces, wreaking absolute havoc. In Monk's case, this havoc is the complete erasure of his identity as an intellectual, a writer, and an individual. A man's expression of his identity becomes the very act that destroys it. In society's case, Monk's *pharmakon* produces yet another cultural artifact that legitimizes and perpetuates a legacy of racial oppression, erasing the existence and significance of millions of identities. Instead of offering hope for marginalized writers, who ideally find a voice in their art, *Erasure* would seem to serve as a warning. At the same time, Everett leverages his understanding of language and culture to illustrate the confounding nature of racism as it exploits the power of language. His portrayal of Monk's *pharmakon* is itself an indictment of the publishing industry and the racist appetite of society. The effects of the *pharmakon,* however, are not limited to the publishing industry alone.

Indeed, Everett's take on Derrida's *pharmakon* suggests that its implications reach far beyond the literary crowd. By illustrating how language really works (or does not work) around, within, and about us, Everett reveals the active role the *pharmakon* plays in our postmodern world – a world in which race, identity, and ideology continue to dangle in the tension between fear and power. This tension will only continue to heighten as long as two conditions remain. Any text has the power to betray its author. And our society has reached a point at which any

reading performed on a cultural text is no longer void of bias. If we are ever to progress, it will require a radical re-thinking of culture, and thus the way we use language. bell hooks hinted toward this with her hopeful post-modern resistance, and Ralph Ellison advocated for it with his system of aesthetics. The picture Everett paints in *Erasure*, though, is ultimately bleak. In a time when our intellectual progress is disproportionate to that of our society, grappling with the *pharmakon* may add insult to injury. We may feel trapped, helpless under the whims of language, hopeless in the face of our historical tendency toward oppression and violence. A solution remains unclear. This essay ends, then, in the very same manner of Everett's text- *hypotheses non fingo*. Like Everett, I feign no hypotheses. Fortunately, the lack of a hypothesis does not necessarily nullify a search for answers. The chase, as far as I am concerned, is on.

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Reaching Up for the "Oughtness"

About three months into my teaching career, I began experiencing an uneasiness that increased over time. Not surprisingly, the source of this uneasiness came from a team meeting in which we discussed numbers. I teach developmental reading and writing courses at a technical college, and I serve on a team called the "Developmental Education Improvement Team." At this particular meeting, we were discussing our student demographics. About half of them are considered minority students. More than half of our students live below the poverty level, and many of them are first generation college students. We pored over the requisite bar graphs and pie charts, comparing our students with the college's "general population" students (i.e. non-developmental), and I discovered that there were far fewer minority students in the general population. I considered the fact that we got many minority students in the door and into my classes, but then they seemingly disappeared, lost somewhere in between. And here is where the uneasiness set in. I wanted to know why we were losing these students, and I wanted to know why so many minority students placed into developmental education in the first place. Essentially, this was my first run-in with the hard truth of the achievement gap.

Although it was a new issue for me, the achievement gap is nothing new to institutions of higher education. Schools have been grappling with it for years, wrestling with the fact that some students are more successful – far more successful – than others. In my school, white students and students of Asian descent are considered highly successful. The success rates for Latin American students lag significantly, and those of African American students even further behind. The gap between white students and students of color is one of our institution's most confounding, and closeted, conundrums. And it is most glaring in the area of composition,

which is what gave me pause during that meeting. I couldn't help but wonder what my role, as an educator, was in all of this. My uneasiness led me to pick John Baugh's book *Out of the Mouths of Slaves* from a summer reading list, not knowing that his text would help me understand not only the achievement gap, but one of the longest-lasting struggles of the American educational system: the complex interplay of language and power that has left African American students, indeed any non-traditional American student, effectively behind.

Understanding the relevance of language and power in education is a complex matter. Examining the historical struggle of African American Vernacular English and linguistic prejudice, however, offers much insight. It also requires that we understand the historical context that gave rise to African American Vernacular English (AAVE), the dialect of English spoken by many African Americans. Baugh, an expert on AAVE, explains that many dialects of English were, and remain, concentrated on the East Coast, the original area settled by several European nations. A more mainstream English developed, however, when immigrants from the East spread westward across the United States after the industrial revolution (Baugh 4). As many people with many linguistic patterns scattered across the states, their dialects commingled, eventually creating what we know of today as "standard" American English. At the same time, there was a large movement of African Americans who migrated from the South to the North after the Civil War. The majority of them chose the urban centers of the North as their new home, bringing with them both their "Southern speech patterns" and "all of the unique linguistic forms that had been incorporated into the grammatical structure of speech among slaves" (Baugh 4). This mix of speech patterns and linguistic structures formed the beginnings of AAVE.

Unlike many white immigrants, African Americans were relegated to the impoverished areas of cities. The physical isolation of African American communities in turn meant linguistic isolation, which incubated the development and usage of AAVE (Baugh 4). So, in contrast to other dialects of American English, AAVE did not collaborate to create a more "standard" form of English, but instead stood apart. Although this separation allowed AAVE to flourish, it simultaneously created a gap between AAVE and the more mainstream forms of American English, between those who spoke AAVE (African Americans) and those who did not (white Americans). This gap opened the space for white American English to become the accepted "standard" form of English, but Constance Weaver tells us that this becoming was no accident. She writes that "standard dialects are labeled such as a means of 'creating linguistic distance between a social elite and the vast majority of speakers by the attempt to impose a set of arbitrary rules'" (Weaver 231). As the distance deepened, the "retention of unique linguistic forms, racism, and educational apartheid" (4) participated to foster the development of many linguistic misconceptions surrounding AAVE (Baugh). And all of these misconceptions "amount to the opinion that all speakers of [AAVE] lack intelligence" (Baugh 4). The perpetuation of these misconception is what linguists call "linguistic prejudice," and it is even more harmful than it sounds.

Misconceptions of AAVE as lazy or error-ridden dismiss an important product of America's history: the "linguistic consequences of slavery" (Baugh 5). To maintain their power, slave traders deliberately separated slaves from others who spoke the same language, thus preventing the formation of ethnic communities who shared a language (communities which immigrants to America were able to form freely). Linguistic alienation was also instrumental in

suppressing slaves – it was illegal for slaves to learn to read and write. What this means is that, from the beginning, language was used as a means of power. At first, African Americans were denied the use of their native languages, and, as they acquired a new language, they were denied literacy. Since African Americans were prevented from educational, economic, and social equality, the dialect that they developed in these conditions had little opportunity to become relevant in the dominant culture. And this sliver of opportunity closes up entirely when the dominant culture, to this day, seizes upon the differences of AAVE as indicative of its inferiority and the inferiority of its speakers. It is this catch-22 that deepens the divide between AAVE and standard English into what Baugh calls the "linguistic abyss" (5).

The divide between AAVE and standard English has, like any vicious cycle, deepened over time. Weaver explains the cycle as beginning when we, at some point, look "down upon certain peoples, but having learned to reject or ridicule their language as a means of denying them equality with us, we humans eventually reject the peoples partly *because* of their language difference" (229). Naming AAVE an inferior form of English serves to deny African Americans equality with white Americans, but eventually misconceptions of the dialect become misconceptions of the people. For example, the idea that AAVE is merely "slang" or a form of "lazy speech" eventually evolves into the stereotypical view of African Americans as lazy and crass (Weaver 230). Likewise, the view of mainstream American English as *the* Standard American English becomes a statement about the superiority of its speakers. Weaver puts it bluntly: "Thus in the United States, what's been called standard English is standard only in that it's the dialect of white supremacy" (231). The assumption today that nonstandard English speakers are "ignorant, lazy, and less capable intellectually" (4) does not come from language

but from a historical legacy of racism and ignorance (Baugh). Even a cursory understanding of linguistic science confirms this.

As a linguist himself, Baugh asserts that linguistic science holds all races and languages as equal. Weaver agrees, stating that "linguists typically reject the term 'standard English' because linguistically there is no standard from which all other dialects are derived" (232). In the same light, linguistic research confirms the validity of AAVE as a dialect, a "language variety in its totality—including vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, pragmatics, and any other aspect of the linguistic system" (Finegan 374). Furthermore, "the fact that [AAVE is] not regarded as standard English today has no bearing on their grammaticality or appropriateness" (Finegan 395). To demonstrate this, Baugh dedicates four chapters of his text, an entire section titled "Linguistic Dimensions of African American Vernacular English," to several of his own studies that examine words and phrases in AAVE and their linguistic/grammatical roles. He goes on to detail countless examples of empirical research that has confirmed – time and time again – the validity of AAVE as a "coherent linguistic system" (Baugh 153). Baugh's not alone on this front either, which he proves by exploring countless studies on the legitimacy of AAVE and the potency of linguistic prejudice. Despite linguists' robust social activism, their views have "never been reflected in social terms" (Baugh 8). Linguistic prejudice remains a pervasive and active force in many structures of our society.

One such structure is that of education. The pervasive nature of linguistic prejudice has profoundly affected American students, and we can see its impact most obviously in the achievement gap. Baugh outlines the ways that traditional educational policy fails to address or overcome linguistic prejudice in *Out of the Mouths of Slaves*, coining the term "educational

malpractice" to illustrate the ways our ineffective policies and practices harm students. By

leveraging his own personal experiences as well as landmark court trials and public

controversies, Baugh details the crippling effect of inadequate diagnostics, inaccurate

assessments, and insufficient educational policy on our African American students. Many

schools, for instance, still run diagnostics that attribute dialectical differences to pathological

causes, wrongfully placing students in remedial courses or special education programs (Baugh

54). His examples, culminating in the unpackaging of the Oakland Ebonics case, provide a

"regretful testament of wrongful educational practices" (Baugh 56). When the Oakland Board

of Education passed their resolution to declare Ebonics as the official language of 28,000 of

their students, the ensuing controversy revealed the "tip of an educational malpractice iceberg

that is largely concealed beneath a sea of bureaucratic avoidance that has failed to overcome

linguistic bigotry in schools or society" (Baugh 60).

This is the same bigotry that inevitably funnels students into developmental writing

programs, and it affects all of our non-traditional students. In their chapter on basic writing

pedagogy, Deborah Mutnick and Steve Lamos explore the "impact of persistent racial

discrimination and class inequalities on the demographics of higher education" (21). Often, the

basic writing student has been "marginalized by mainstream societal exclusions and inequalities

with respect to race, class, gender, sexuality, language, and culture" (Mutnick & Lamos 25).

Frequently they are labeled by inadequate assessments, assessments that have "indicated little

more than the darker color of our students' skin and the lower socioeconomoic status of their

caretakers" (Mutnick & Lamos 25). Mutnick and Lamos also attest that basic writing students,

especially those of color, are assumed to be entering college with a "linguistic or academic

deficit" (25). In a way, basic writing programs, though they are intended to help students, frequently become the same form of academic apartheid that Baugh discusses in his text. In order to avoid this, developmental writing programs will have to examine their approaches to ensure that their view of students as "linguistically disadvantaged" is attributed to a "social handicap that results from prevailing linguistic prejudice" rather than a "pathological linguistic disability" (Baugh 60). Too often, these programs adopt the latter, and the implications are the same as those Baugh outlines in his text: students are improperly tested, placed, and taught.

The repeated iterations of a broken system over time have been made visible by the achievement gap. Shedding light on this situation may overwhelm those of us wanting to do something about it- myself included. Not only must developmental writing programs examine their approaches, but we must also acknowledge the legacy of institutional racism and linguistic prejudice that came before them. The weight of this acknowledgement alone is daunting, but we must also take a hard look at our own participation in a system that does not serve our students well, determining our roles in finding a remedy. Again, this is a heavy burden, especially when fighting such a subversive and embedded evil. As the word *hopeless* trembles on the tips of our tongues, however, I am reminded of Martin Luther King Jr.'s acceptance speech upon receiving the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964:

> I refuse to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history. I refuse to accept the idea that the "isness" of man's present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal "oughtness" that forever confronts him. I refuse to accept the idea that man is mere flotsom and jetsom in the river of life, unable to influence the unfolding events which surround him. ("Martin Luther King Jr.")

As educators, we have inherited a system that was not built well for all of our students, but we also have the ability to influence the events that unfold around us daily. While systemic change may be a painstaking and slow process, we can start the work in our own classrooms. In this, we have hope. Armed with educational and linguistic research, such as that provided in Baugh's text, we will have the information we need to "help less fortunate students 'catch up' to their more fortunate peers" (Baugh 25). In this we have strength. And we can take courage by looking to our fellow teachers who have already begun to do the work of systemic change, starting in their own classrooms.

Constance Weaver is one such teacher. She takes her cues from Freire and Wink, suggesting that we "problematize the ways in which language and dialect are used as discriminators" (Weaver 238). Together with her students, Weaver asks questions and creates meaningful conversations around themes such as power, language, and privilege. For example: she asks her students to consider who benefits when one dialect is labeled as "standard," and who is harmed. She explicitly addresses linguistic prejudice, how it both reflects and promotes stereotypes, and she even challenges her students to devise their own solutions (Weaver 238). The key here is that Weaver does not skirt the issue with her students; she confronts it head-on, opening up space for discussion and reflection. And she takes a similar stance when it comes to teaching a standard dialect. She refers to Rickford's work that proves "programs that demonstrate the systematicity of the vernacular to students and contrast it with the standard variety" help students transition successfully from their home dialect to the standard (Weaver 237). Weaver's methodology is based on her belief that "we English language arts teachers have a moral obligation to engage students in discussion, reading, writing, and viewing

experiences that will enable them to consider…'man's inhumanity to man' (and woman's too)"

(Weaver 239). While Weaver does not solve the problem itself, she certainly does not ignore it.

John White does not ignore the legacy of linguistic prejudice either. In his classes for

pre-service teachers, White's goal is to "get the students to see that though we should teach

the conventions of Standard English, we should also acknowledge and even celebrate the

unique and highly effective forms of discourse that students bring with them into the

classroom" (44). He echoes Baugh when he says that we should view students' language usage

not as "deficits that we should squelch" but rather as "unique discursive forms" (White 44).

White suggests that we teach students "code-switching," which would add standard English to

students' linguistic toolbox, rather than replace their home dialect. Not surprisingly, many of

White's students – bound for their own classrooms – buck against his philosophy and staunchly

defend the teaching of standard English. White gently offers them a different perspective

through several activities. These activities allow students to practice code-switching themselves

and to experience the vulnerability and discomfort of using an unfamiliar dialect (White 47). In

one activity, White engages students by asking them to translate a favorite song to standard

English or to translate canonical poetry into hip-hop. Through his activities and class discussion,

White challenges the traditional role of the English teacher and encourages his students to do

the same. Not only is he making his own classroom "dynamic, inclusive, and relevant to

students' lives," but he is helping future teachers consider doing the same (White 49). This is

how transformative change happens.

Early on in his book, Baugh warns: "If we ever hope to overcome linguistic ignorance

and uninformed assumptions about race and language, then educators must participate in

systemic reforms that will ensure educational equity" (15). As I mentioned before, this is a heavy responsibility to bear. But as I recall the pie charts and the data, my students' faces, the history of our nation—is it any heavier a weight than this reality is? I think not. Examining the teaching practices of Weaver, White, and Mr. Ramsay helps me to see our responsibility as teachers not as a burden, but as an opportunity. Yes, my students come to me from a broken system. Yes, many of them have been unfairly treated, even harmed, in the name of education. But I have been given the great privilege of coming alongside them and doing things differently. I am energized by this opening of possibility and by the examples of those educators who I see around me, reaching up for the "eternal oughtness" that our students deserve.

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The Road Less (or is it fewer?) Traveled:

Building A Case Against Traditional Grammar

"We must all face the choice between what is right and what is easy."

–Albus Dumbledore

One of my colleagues recently asked me how my graduate studies were going this semester. I responded enthusiastically, describing what I was learning about teaching grammar in the context of writing and finding new ways to cure a career–long frustration. "How could we, as teachers, ignore this? How can we not do anything about it?" I asked him, not noticing the dead look on his face. As I took a breath to continue, he interrupted me and said, "Don't get carried away, Emily. Your class is just following a swing in the pedagogical pendulum." My smile wilted. His facial expression should have prepared me, but with his superior experience and expertise I assumed that he would surely validate my excitement. It turns out I was wrong. Instead, he explained that, a few years ago, traditional grammar simply went out of fashion and was replaced by newfangled grammar techniques, mere trends. Soon enough, he warned (and I swear he wagged his index finger at me), traditional grammar would reenter the pedagogical scene and take its rightful place in academia. As my cheeks blazed, signaling that yet another blossom of my naiveté had dissolved into experience, I drooped into submission and mumbled that I had to go to a meeting. Our conversation ended in proper T.S. Eliot fashion– not with a bang, but a whimper.

At first, I think my shame stemmed from his parental admonishment. The only way our encounter could have possibly felt worse would be if he had grounded me. After further thought, though, I realized that this shame came from a deeper, more vulnerable place. When

he challenged me, I did not defend what I knew, intuitively and objectively, to be true about

grammar. And, what's worse, I knew that I could not have defended it if I tried. I didn't have the

names of any studies to drop. I didn't have an elevator speech on the most significant research

findings. I didn't even have a single, cheap buzz word to toss his way. All I had was a wide-eyed

stare and red cheeks. As he left my office and I walked off to my pretend meeting, I decided

that the time had come for me to roll up my sleeves and do some research. I wanted to prove

not only that traditional grammar doesn't work, but also that it's been proven ineffective for

quite some time now. I wanted to talk the talk and walk the walk, to prove that I was no

bandwagon jumper and that the counter-tradition in grammar pedagogy was more than just a

swing of the pendulum. Naturally, I turned first to my textbooks for guidance.

Published in 2008, Constance Weaver's *Grammar to Enrich & Enhance Writing* seeks to

prove the power of teaching grammar only in the context of writing. Offering support, practical

tools, and encouragement, this book serves as a guide through the many pitfalls and sinkholes

of rethinking grammar. Weaver works on the premise that traditional grammar traditionally

taught is ineffective. She claims that "Regardless of the hopes of parents, politicians,

administrators, and teachers, research does not show that teaching grammar in isolation has

significant benefits for most students' writing" ("Grammar to Enrich" 52). The research Weaver

alludes to here forms the basis of her argument: twelve principles that give rise to "a better

way" of teaching, learning, and writing. These principles include that "teaching grammar

divorced from writing doesn't strengthen writing and is therefore a waste of time," that

"grammar options are best expanded through reading and in conjunction with writing," and

that "grammar conventions are applied most readily when taught in conjunction with writing"

(Weaver, "Grammar to Enrich" 26–38). Together, these principles combine to create a compelling, research–fortified argument. But there's a catch. Much of Weaver's research for these principles comes from the same time period. Of all the studies used to support Weaver's grammatical philosophy, the majority of them occurred in the 80s and 90s (the earliest of them in 1980). This somewhat narrow time frame seems to fit the pendulum bill. Although she leans on several studies from the early 2000s, these later studies are mostly Weaver's own work. Many would be quick to point this out as bias or, again, a narrow sample. And so, while I remain a diehard Weaver fangirl, her work does not give my argument the necessary strength. At least not on its own.

Like Constance Weaver, Edgar Schuster also hopes to provide a better way in his 2003 text called *Breaking the Rules: Liberating Writers Through Innovative Grammar Instruction*. Before he explains how to liberate writers with innovative teaching, Schuster explains from what exactly writers need to be liberated. You guessed it– traditional school grammar. He defines traditional grammar as a confounding set of "rules that do not rule" and "definitions that do not define" (Schuster 16). As such, traditional grammar goes beyond simple ineffectiveness; it also traps students in a demoralizing and damaging mindset. By examining faulty definitions and mythrules, Schuster takes great care to illustrate how this happens. He takes even greater care to offer new practices that free students from the constrictions of traditional conventions. In the end of his book, Schuster writes, "I hope I have provided enough evidence in this book to persuade you that much of school grammar tradition is counterproductive…I hope I have also persuaded you that there are better ways" (191–192). Being a rabble-rouser by nature and a skeptic by experience, I was successfully persuaded. To

be fair though, I was sold on his argument as soon as I read the title. As a crusader for renegade grammar, however, I must keep in mind that not everyone will be as easily impressed.

While convincing, his persuasive ends may give rise to suspicion. In fact, some of Schuster's inflammatory commentary may deepen the breach between the red pen brigade and the paintbrush folks. The most convincing of his arguments, McQuade's 1980 article on his classroom study, appears in Schuster's introduction. Beyond that, Schuster's most heavily researched chapter is the first, in which he discusses the history of traditional grammar. Only at the very end of the chapter does he nod toward what he calls the "counter tradition." According to Schuster, there has always been resistance to traditional grammar, but he does not give enough evidence to suggest either longstanding proof of traditional grammar's inefficacy or the superior efficacy of any alternative. In this respect, Schuster doesn't leave me well-prepared for battle. Without further research, neither Weaver nor Schuster would be sufficient back–up for the cornered grammar rebel, especially since in this case the grammar rebel is me, and I tend to do really poorly when cornered.

Fortunately, the research is out there. And it's not that hard to find. In her 2014 article for *The Atlantic*, Michelle Navarre Cleary writes: "A century of research shows that traditional grammar lessons…don't help and may even hinder students' efforts to become better writers." Here Cleary confirms that not only is Schuster right about a counter tradition, but this counter tradition has also been fortifying itself with research for the past *century*. And so the plot thickens. Cleary's article references James Flood's *Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts*, which is notable because in it Flood cites three major studies examining data collected since the early 1900s. The conclusions of these studies indicate that "there is a

fairly strong consensus" we can draw from this data: the teaching of grammar does not make students better at writing (Flood 640).

In fact, it has little effect at all (Flood 591). George Hillocks and Michael Smith confirmed this back in 1991 when they concluded that "Research over a period of 90 years has consistently shown that the teaching of school grammar has little or no effect on students" (Weaver, "Facts"). In a move that seems to validate these claims, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) "passed a motion stating that the use of isolated grammar and usage exercises not supported by theory and research is a deterrent to the improvement of students' speaking and writing" (Fisher). This happened in 1985, and the NCTE– "the pre– eminent professional body for language arts in North America"– does not make decisions based on a whim. Basically, studies disproving the benefits of traditional grammar have been around for years. What's more, professional bodies of knowledge and keepers of best practices have been denouncing traditional grammar practices for years. Not specific enough to prove anything? Don't worry. There's more.

As it turns out, there's much more. In 1959, John DeBoer wrote an article called "Grammar in Language Teaching" that was published by the NCTE (yes, the very same association that would pass a motion against traditional grammar 26 years later). Much of DeBoer's article lays the groundwork for both Weaver and Schuster. He explains, for example, that "many textbook rules are unsupported by the reports of trained observers of our language" (DeBoer 413). DeBoer also believes that grammar should be taught "in harmony with the scientific observation of the facts of spoken and written English" and that grammar should be taught "directly in connection" with writing (414). Sound familiar?

More importantly than his argument, though, are the grounds on which DeBoer builds his argument. After establishing that many of his contemporary teachers stubbornly believe in the importance and benefit of traditional grammar, DeBoer proposes that teachers' resistance "justifies periodic re–examination of the evidence on the subject" (414). For evidence, he calls on both an informed linguistic understanding of how children learn language as well as studies on the efficacy of formal grammar instruction. It is this "re–examination" that I find so compelling. First of all, his choice in naming it a "re–examination" as opposed to an "examination" suggests that, even in 1959, this evidence was nothing new. DeBoer's tone almost seems tired as he explains that "the experimental evidence on this question has been frequently summarized" and as he lists several authors who have done such summarizing (415). To paraphrase him: look, all this evidence is out there in multiple places, but I guess if you need it in one place to believe it, here it is. As for the evidence he references, it speaks for itself.

In the span of two pages, DeBoer details 21 research reports published over the course of 55 years, from 1903 to 1957. For the purpose of his article, he only includes studies that deal directly with "the relation between grammar teaching and children's language expression" (DeBoer). These studies represent schools and students over time, across the country, and at different levels of educational obtainment, from elementary to high school. Despite the diversity of the studies, their conclusions "exhibit a degree of unanimity that is rare in the field of educational research" (DeBoer 417). Not only do they "dramatically confirm" the way that linguistic knowledge has shaped our understanding of language acquisition, but they also prove with resounding agreement that traditional grammar simply is not effective. DeBoer admits that in a field as vast as education, the number of studies he re–examines is quite small, and he

concedes that several of the studies may contain a level of error or signs of flawed research design. But he also reminds us:

> The impressive fact is, however, that in all these studies, carried out in places and at times far removed from each other, often by highly experienced and disinterested investigators, the results have been consistently negative so far as the value of grammar in the improvement of language expression is concerned.

If that is not enough, he finishes his re–examination by urging that "Surely there is no justification in the available evidence for the great expenditure of time and effort still being devoted to formal grammar in American schools" (DeBoer 417). One can only imagine what DeBoer would say after discovering that, 57 years later, formal grammar is still a common practice in American schools today.

At the risk of turning DeBoer over in his grave, resurrecting his argument is necessary for defending the counter tradition. His article establishes the historicity of this issue in two ways. First, it was published in 1959, and, more importantly, he incorporates research that dates back to the beginning of the 20th century. If this movement is merely a swing of the pendulum, then we are talking about quite the pendulum here. DeBoer also offers a condensed summary of research, an arsenal of justification ripe for the defending. Exploring any of the studies he offers leads to a researcher's rabbit hole, yielding article after article of proof published both before his article and leading to many written after. Ronald Wardhaugh's 1967 study at Ross Sheppard High School, for instance, reveals hard evidence supporting DeBoer's claims. Wardhaugh's work was published 8 years after DeBoer's article, but proves that further research only provides "still further evidence of the invalidity of an important basic assumption

behind much instruction… i.e. that the teaching of grammar does help students to write better compositions" (429). Wardhaugh emphasizes– I like to think for my own benefit– that his findings "support those of earlier studies that knowledge of traditional grammar is but poorly related to ability to write" (429). A pattern is definitely beginning to develop here.

Later, in 1986, George Hillocks, Jr. reviewed studies similar to Wardhaugh's in his major work: *Research on Written Composition: New Directions for Teaching*. In his final chapter "Grammar and the Manipulation of Syntax," Hillocks explains that, despite significant and compelling research, many teachers continue to teach traditional grammar. As if to demonstrate the absurdity of this fact, Hillocks reviews multiple experiments, the findings of which all confirm that "the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing" (133). Take the studies done by White (1965), Whitehead (1966), Bowden (1979), J.L. Sullivan (1969), and Elley, et al. (1976), for example. Each of these studies investigates the effect of teaching traditional school grammar as compared with the effect of teaching no grammar whatsoever. All five studies "found no significant differences between the two treatments" (Hillocks 134). In fact, none of the studies examined by Hillocks offer any support for teaching grammar as a method to improve student writing skills (Hillocks 138). Hillocks, similar to DeBoer, patiently points to the historicity and validity of the counter– tradition in a way that makes it seem less "counter" and more, well, tradition. Maybe Weaver and Schuster did not bulk their books with research because they simply felt that it was not necessary. For years, others had been laying that groundwork for them.

Edwin Epps would agree. Despite his self–prescribed "grammar burnout" (18), Epps rallies himself to raise the issue of traditional grammar in his 1999 article for *The Quarterly*, which he subtly titled "Grammar…Again." Epps begins his article, "Here I go one more time," and moves on to cite the familiar players– Hillocks, Weaver, the NCTE, and many others– as justification for the "case against traditional grammar" (19). Of note, he includes Elizabeth Haynes' warning that "While traditional grammar may be included in the curriculum as a humane and interesting discipline, or as a body of knowledge worthy of study, it should not be taught as an aid to writing" (as cited in Epps 19). As for why it should not be taught, Epps points to David Foster's statement: "…no convincing empirical evidence has shown any link between knowing grammar—traditional or transformational—and writing well" (19). By cruising through over ten different studies within one page of his article, Epps proves his tired point. Teaching grammar outside of the context of writing does not work, and we should know this by now.

Considering Epps' exasperation and my colleague's doorway allocution, however, we clearly don't know that traditional school grammar does not work. And this is strange considering the fact that arguments against traditional grammar have spanned the entire twentieth century. Taking a closer look at the research may offer some insight. Much of the literature proves that traditional grammar is an outdated and ineffective practice. This is great evidence. But if it the case of grammar was a murder case (which it may be if Epps has to write another article on the subject), we would only be part of the way there. We know who did not commit the crime, but now we must prove who did. We need to focus on what grammar practices *do* work in the composition classroom.

In many of the articles I have mentioned, the authors take at least a stab at which grammar practices may work. DeBoer suggests that grammar be taught only "functionally" as a tool for writing, and he recommends that teachers substitute descriptive grammar for prescriptive grammar (418). Similarly, Cleary writes that effective grammar instruction provides "targeted lessons on problems that students immediately apply to their own writing," rather than formal grammar lessons. She also cites Arizona State and the Community College of Baltimore as institutions that have successfully shifted away teaching "stand-alone" grammar. Both Schuster and Weaver take far more than a stab at the issue, devoting entire textbooks to sound lessons that teach grammar in the context of writing. Alternatives like those given here are imperative in the daily fight against a recalcitrant tradition, but they may prove unhelpful when faced by opposition. What we need is research. Research like that found in Hillocks' work when, in his final chapter, he thoroughly reviews seminal studies on sentence combining. He presents the data and findings of each study, concluding in the end that "no other single teaching approach has ever consistently been shown to have a beneficial effect on syntactic maturity and writing quality" (151). A statement like this makes quite the point, but backed by data it makes an impact. Robust research on different students, in diverse classrooms, by dedicated teachers will build my case. This is the type of information I must have.

At the beginning of this process, my end goal was to do just that: fortify myself with the proper knowledge I would need when confronted by naysayers. My best-case scenario was to redeem myself in a blaze of grammar infidel glory, marching my colleague to our dean and watching him admit that grammar was best taught only in the context of writing. As I researched, though, I realized that this project was more complicated than I originally thought.

Proving the historicity and validity of the counter-tradition was easy. Instead of finding myself encouraged by the research, however, I was more bewildered than ever by the pervasive and abundant presence of traditional grammar. The more time I spent researching, the more I began to understand Schuster's call for teacher-researchers. We do not have sufficient proof that teaching grammar in the context of writing works better. If we are ever to change the tide of grammar instruction, then the research on positive, effective pedagogy must be deafening. We will have to shoulder into the weight of our already-laden work, diligently implementing, observing, and reporting the methods we believe in. When I realized this, my appetite for vindication was absorbed by what felt like swallowing a wet sock –conviction. If my work here ends with this project, then I might as well join my colleague in dismissing this as a trend. Fortunately, it's too late for this rebel. If there's anything my research has shown me (aside from the counter tradition's validity and the fact that I need to clean my computer screen), it's that the journey ahead is not an easy one. But it's the only route I'm taking.

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