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Promising Truths, in Fiction & Teaching Sincerity

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What am I but the inter-
section of these loves?
—Dean Young, “Luciferin”



Mixed media collage of one preservice teacher's aspirations as an English teacher.

RECENTLY, IN AN ENGLISH METHODS COURSE, I asked my preservice teacher-students to create mixed-media collages representing the English teachers they aspire to be. I set out a

variety of disparate texts—old photographs I’d taken and collected, favorite poems, children’s books, pages ripped from novels and literary magazines—gave them the prompt, turned them loose with the scissors and glue sticks, let them be. The point was to open the students up to multimodal approaches to reading and writing (New London Group, 2000) in order to get them thinking about the purposes of their work, the values they bring to the English classroom, and just how they might begin to make a life in the profession. Looking over what they made afterwards, I was startled by what I saw.

The collage above repurposes two images I’d provided—a photograph of a pond near campus I ran by every day and a whimsical illustration of a bear a girlfriend gave me once—in working through the student’s understanding of the English teacher this student aspired to be. It was startling to see my deeply personal images taken up by the student and recontextualized to an entirely different end. That shouldn’t have been surprising, as I’d provided materials I had lying around for their use on the assignment, but it surprised me anyway. There were other moments, too, in scanning across the collages that gave me pause and transported me away: one student cut up an image of a stained-glass window from a conference I’d attended and arranged it into a triptych; another, lines from a Billy Collins poem (“I am not the bread and the knife / you are still the bread and the knife”) I’d taught to my own English students years before on the Texas-Mexico border; others haphazardly pasted lyrics from songs and snippets from old *New Yorker* issues that had been sitting out for months on my coffee table and needed to go. All the materials—*my* materials—had been thoroughly repurposed as aesthetic matter for imagining students’ own future lives as English teachers. The activity makes an apt metaphor for pedagogy: teachers bring material (texts, novels, objectives, prejudices, experiences) into the classroom and to students, who take it up and do something with it themselves.¹ The alchemy of that process is at the heart of what I’m interested in with this essay.

As the type of grad student well-versed² in critique, it’s easy, instinctual even, for me to read this exercise critically, as a narcissistic imposition of myself onto my students, the activity as metaphor for the type of problematic and unjust reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977/1990; Freire, 2000) that deserves criticizing. That may be true. In addition to that critique, though, I’m interested in the way the activity also demonstrated something different from reproduction, in that students repurposed materials in new and surprising ways, suggesting, as per the collage, that the material “belongs to all of us.” Not only am I interested in that latter, more hopeful reading, I’m interested in examining the extent to which the two readings can coexist, the critical and the hopeful, and how an awareness of both might cohere in pedagogy. I’m curious about what happened to me, the teacher (and to myself) as well as the students, my others, who encountered this material that mattered so much to me and made of it something of their own, refashioned for *their* self in ways that spoke affirmatively to the teachers they aspired to be. As the novelist Italo Calvino (1993) asks, “Who are we, who is each one of us, if not a combinatoria of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined?” That this encounter, happening in a classroom, might be read as both critical and hopeful—that’s what I mean when I speak of what follows as *sincerity*.

I believe I was sincere in sharing these materials with my students pedagogically, personal though they may be and problematic as the act may be read critically. I genuinely felt that who I was and what I brought in, things that meant so much to me, would matter to my students. In this essay, I make the case for teaching as a sincere act. By that, I don’t mean the conventional notion of operating without “pretense, deceit, or hypocrisy” (OED), but instead a more radical uptake drawn from literature—fiction (e.g., Egan, 2010; Eggers, 2001; Wallace, 2001)—and literary

theory (Kelly, 2016) that understands the concept as “always contaminated internally by the threat of manipulating the other...this sincerity depends not on purity but on trust and faith” (Kelly, 2016, p. 201). Such a sincerity offers educators ways of teaching hopefully, bringing forth themselves in conversation with students. The point is not to avoid or move past critique but rather to preserve hope alongside the critique: a conviction that what we do as teachers, in bringing ourselves into the classroom, is worthwhile, even while bearing in mind the very real reasons we should be critical of the ways we inevitably and always exercise power. Drawing on that collage again: I don’t want to give up trying to be a good teacher, a really good one even,³ despite being trained as a critical scholar to read the work of teaching as inevitably an exertion of power and will, authority, colonialism, latent prejudice, etc. To that end, sincerity offers a way of rethinking teaching as primarily and problematically a manipulative and impositional act, a mode of imagining pedagogy beyond the dichotomy between oppressive transmission pedagogies and liberatory critical ones. Moreover, the concept provides a different understanding of the pedagogical relationship that complicates the taken-for-granted-ness of student-centered approaches, which too often privilege the student while downplaying or outright ignoring the humanity of the teacher. I suggest that if we’re going to humanize (Paris & Winn, 2013) our work as educators and scholars of education, taking seriously the notion that there is “no education without relation” (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004), a renewed theorizing that affirms the role of the teacher as relationally important, as having something to offer through the communication of their selves, can enrich the work of teaching—as an extension of teachers’ lives, as creative and communal, compelling, complex, and deeply personal work—in ways that prove fruitful for both teachers and students.

Sincerity, Authenticity, Sincerity (Again): A Literary History

I’ve come to say exactly what I mean, and I mean so many things.
—Joe Pugg, *Hymn #101*

Sincerity has been largely eschewed in education research, beyond a few early experiments in alternative and democratic schooling (e.g., Neill, 1960) that equate the concept with honesty, a moral and behavioral virtue to be instilled in children. Yet there is a long history that considers sincerity in literary theory (See the work of Kelly, 2016, for a more thorough telling of that history). My theorizing here will work through that history in order to more robustly establish sincerity as a concept of value for the work of educators.

A major early study (Trilling, 1972) surveyed sincerity in literature dating back to Shakespeare. There Trilling defines sincerity as “a congruence between avowal and actual feeling,” citing *Hamlet* as a central text and particularly the famous lines:

This above all—to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day
Thou canst not then be false to any man.
(Shakespeare, 1.3.78-80, as cited in Kelly, 2016, p. 198)

In that understanding “truth to one’s own self should be conceived of not as an end, but as a means of ensuring truth *to others*” (Kelly, 2016, p. 199, emphasis mine). By the 20th century, literary sincerity had gone out of fashion, replaced by a Modernist (e.g., the works of T. S. Eliot and James

Joyce) ideal of authenticity that conceives of truth to the self as an end rather than a means. As Kelly explains:

Whereas sincerity places emphasis on intersubjective truth and communication with others, on what Trilling calls the “public end in view,” authenticity conceives truth as inward, personal, and hidden, the goal primarily of self-examination rather than other-directed communication...which is less and less willing to take account of the habitual preferences of the audience. (p. 199)

This Modernist shift to authenticity rejected two central components of any conception of sincerity: (1) intention, which was denigrated by the New Critics⁴ as a fallacy in studying literature, and (2) the privileging of a public self, which “became associated with bad faith or an artificial dishonesty” (Kelly, 2016, p. 200).

A number of literary movements followed adding to the privilege of authenticity, including existentialist and absurdist literature in Europe and Beat writing and confessional poetry in America. During the 1960s and 70s, the pendulum swung again, as the arrival of postmodern (particularly French, poststructural) theory (the work of Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, etc.) called authenticity into question. Postmodern authors in the U.S. like John Barth, Don DeLillo, and Thomas Pynchon, as well as abroad—Samuel Beckett, Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino—troubled authenticity themselves, publishing fiction that put notions of selfhood under pressure (Kelly, 2016, p. 201). A subsequent generation of writers who came of age during the 80s and 90s, steeped in those postmodern fictions and theories in college, again took up questions of self, sincerity, authenticity, and truth in their fiction, leading critics to dub them “The New Sincerity.”

That term has been used to describe authors of fiction like Michael Chabon (e.g., 2012), Junot Díaz (1997, 2008, 2013), Jennifer Egan (2002, 2011), Dave Eggers (2001, 2003, 2006, 2012), Ben Lerner (2011, 2015), David Mitchell (2004), Jonathan Safran Foer (2002), George Saunders (2014, 2017), Zadie Smith (2000), David Foster Wallace (1996, 2001), and Colson Whitehead (2007). In varying ways, these writers narrativize, interrogate, temper, and test issues of the self and the other, sincerity and truth, relational connection and its (im)possibilities.⁵ Theory taught them that sincerity in their writing, communicated through a language in crisis, could never be entirely pure, nor exist outside of the problematics of power, colonialism, and various other -isms, normativity, authority, etc. But rather than devastate their projects, this impossibility came to fuel their writing:

The promise of truth to the other that marks sincerity is always contaminated internally by the threat of manipulating the other, and this threat cannot be eliminated through appeal to intention, morality, or context. Yet this threat should not be understood as the privation of sincerity, but as its very possibility. That sincerity can always be taken for manipulation shows us that sincerity depends not on purity but on trust and faith: if I or the other could be certain that I am being sincere, the notion of sincerity would lose its normative charge. (Kelly, 2016, p. 201)

The New Sincerity, then, is both impossible—in that it works with and through the varied crises of a post-Theory worldview—and at the same time affirms “the possibility of a renewal of our common world” (Hodgson, Vlieghe, & Zamojski, 2018, p. 18) through that very language.

This complex and contradictory ethos shows up in fiction writing in varying ways. Often, sincerity is marked by an anxious hyper-self-awareness, particularly of the commercial forces that shape relationships between the self and the other in writing, as when Eggers (2001) includes an itemized statement of payments received for writing his novel. Additionally, newly-sincere writing typically depends on a privileging of the uncertainty that comes hand-in-hand with language, wherein operating means “never being certain whether you are sincere, and whether your struggle to transcend narcissism, solipsism, irony, and insincerity is even undertaken in good faith” (Kelly, 2016, p. 204-205). The narrator of *Everything is Illuminated* (Foer, 2002) exemplifies this sentiment: “It was impossible to remember what one meant, what, after all of the words, was intended” (p. 261). New Sincerity writing also often makes direct appeals to the reader, as when Wallace (2001) concludes “Octet” with the command: “So decide” (p. 136). As Smith (2003) notes, by leaving the story ambiguously in the hands of the reader, sincerity depends on what happens “off the page, outside words, a curious thing for a piece of writing to want to do” (p. xx).

Across this story, we can understand sincerity in the contemporary milieu as an affirmative relational mode of writing that embraces rather than resists Theory and its critiques, nevertheless persisting in engaging others with the desire to tell the truth helpfully, demonstrating concern with questions of human emotion, sentiment, ethics, etc. It is marked by a self-awareness informed by Theory and wrought by critique, a persistent uncertainty, and a persistence, nevertheless, to reach out sincerely to the reader, the writer’s other. It’s unclear, however, what it might look like to think about this sincerity in the context of pedagogy. One note before I begin: Obviously there are different ways of understanding Theory and criticality, and a distinction should be made between utopian, liberatory approaches and those constituting what Foucault (1983) calls “a hyper- and pessimistic activism” (p. 232). I’m interested in the latter⁶ and in what sincerity might do to reinvigorate the work of a critical pedagogue committed to pessimism: how it might help resist the fall into cynicism and make teaching affirmatively complex, creative, personal, and meaningful work.

Sincerity in the Classroom

In what follows, I theorize how we might think with this new understanding of sincerity, culled from literary theory, in our work as teachers. I begin with my own story, which I do not take to be representative of the stories of others, per se, but rather as providing an opening to consider possibilities for sincerity in education. In that sense, I practice what Gallop (2002) terms “anecdotal theory,” in which she considers her own anecdotes for the theoretical insights they afford. “The anecdotes become ‘interesting’ precisely for their ability to intervene in contemporary theoretical debates” (p. 2), Gallop writes, and here I think an analysis of my own stories helps illustrate the promise of sincerity as a frame that can intervene in some impasses in pedagogy today. Or, put differently, I think my story is one example that offers insight into what Petersen (2018) calls “the specific and the possible” (p. 7) in pedagogy. Rather than make a claim as to its representativeness of the field, I follow Petersen in asserting that “the example happened and that in itself makes it interesting” (p. 7) and useful for thinking with the ideas and implications of New Sincerity fiction.

Beginning with Theory

We all come to be cured of our sentiments in the end.⁷
—Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*

Before I entered graduate school, I read Foucault's (1995) *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. His treatise on the exercise of disciplinary power throughout modernity and its pervasive use in institutions like prisons, factories, hospitals, and—most provocatively for me, a high school English teacher at the time—schools, was mind-blowing in the original sense, before the term lost its force and turned cliché. Reading theory for the first time is, for many, a trip. I was fortunate to read Foucault just as I was exiting the classroom and heading off to the sheltered enclave of doctoral work, where, buoyed by fellowships, I could think about power-knowledge and poststructuralism without the trouble of just what I should do with it—how I would live with it—as a teacher in a classroom and a person in the world. I came to absorb critical theories as a way of thinking, a transformation that, Hungerford (2008) notes, “seem[ed] less a critical movement than a simple assumption about work...not a wave, but a tide, or even just the water we all swim in” (p. 416). Critiques of power, privilege, oppression, and injustice became reflexive; nowhere were these easier to apply than the classroom, where I had so much experience being and acting in relationships of authority and subordination. This mindset served me well in coursework and at conferences, where critique was welcomed both as a mark of competency and of moral correctness.

It did not make it easy to teach. In the third year of my graduate studies, I re-entered the classroom, this time as a teacher educator in the aforementioned English methods course. For the first time since critique had come to subsume the way I looked at nearly everything, I had to advocate affirmatively for something: my pedagogy needed to provide a vision for what good English teaching should be, what my students should do, or how they should think and approach their work. In this, my problem resembled that of the protagonist, Adam, of Lerner's (2011) novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, whose inability to reconcile his understanding of language with the vagaries of experience leaves him unable to write:

When I read *The New York Times* online, where it was always the deadliest day since the invasion began, I wondered if the incommensurability of language and experience was new, if my experience of my experience issues from a damaged life of pornography and privilege, if there were happy ages when the starry sky was the map of all possible paths, or if this division of experience into what could not be named and what could not be lived just was experience, for all time. Either way, I promised myself, I would never write a novel. (p. 64-65)

Dames (2012) points out that Lerner's references to critical theorists—“Adorno's *Minima Moralia* [‘damaged life’] and Lukacs' *Theory of the Novel* [‘happy ages’]”—should be understood as “not just grace notes but essential aspects of the dilemma: Adam has been thoroughly educated in a school of symptomology”⁸ (p. 165). Like Lerner's Adam, I struggled as an educator with critical theories that left me uncertain, tentative that whatever ground I chose to provide students would inevitably, immediately prove fraught with contradiction and problematic with power.

I want to be careful here not to turn my story into the too-easy cliché of a conversion towards belief. That is, I am not turning my back on critique; it is a part of how I look at the world,

and it's inspired much of what I find important about teaching and scholarship. The point of my story is that critique, in its extremity, came to undermine the ground on which I tried to stand as a teacher and scholar (and, honestly, a person). It made me forget that, as Latour (2004) put it—in a statement that I've spent so much time arguing vehemently against the last few years—the point was “never to get away from facts but closer to them” (p. 231), or, as Eggers (2003) would have it, “All I ever wanted was to know what to do” (p. 303).

Mine is also not a unique story. I share it to draw a parallel between my tale and the experience of New Sincerity writers who similarly absorbed critical theories that could be paralyzing (How can a fiction writer write meaningfully without believing in the ability of language to carry meaning? What would be the point?) but who found a way to write anyway. That story is inspiring to me; here, I'll attempt to read it in the context of teaching for the insights it might provide as to how we can go on teaching fruitfully, even as we question the ground on which we stand.

Sincerity & Student-Centered Teaching

One common way we see critique manifested in pedagogy today is in the philosophy and practices of student-centered teaching. Rooted in the critical pedagogy of Freire, the progressive approaches of Dewey and Montessori, and the constructivist learning theories of Piaget and Vygotsky, student-centered teaching attempts to de-center the teacher in the classroom, placing emphasis instead on students as agents for their own learning. The approach is a deliberate intervention in a traditional mode where teachers transmit their knowledge to students, imposing upon them a set of values that critical pedagogues have compellingly critiqued as an unjust relationship. As an alternative, student-centered approaches to teaching have been taken up widely across content areas. In my own field of secondary English, for example, recent work on “assets-based approaches” (e.g., Kinloch, Burkhard, & Penn, 2017; Kirkland, 2013; Knight & Watson, 2014) foregrounds students' literacy practices, especially those taken up *outside* schools, as assets to the work of teaching English *in* schools. That work is important for the ways it recovers and recenters students marginalized by teaching as traditionally conceived (e.g., Kirkland, 2013, considers the literacy practices of black male youth). Such approaches assert that marginalized students are abundantly talented readers and writers capable in their own right. The work concretizes Eggers' (2001) sincere sentiment that “we see the beauty within and cannot say no” (p. 6). It's inspiring, and I want to be clear that I align and inform my own teaching with it. As such, my aim is not to be dismissive of the work but rather to push back against one of its implications for pedagogy—that teachers are the problem and centering students is the answer. It's worth pointing out then that in the classroom we can notice how Eggers' line cuts both ways—teachers may see the beauty within themselves, too, and may not be able to say no to sharing that with their students.

My point is that there may be a contradiction in the ways student-centered, assets-based pedagogy gets taken up. If the underlying assumption of the move towards seeing students' lived experiences as assets is that all human⁹ beings have gifts to contribute to the educational project, then the notion that those other human beings in the pedagogical equation—teachers—don't also possess assets worth including doesn't make much sense. But rather than get into a competition of which humans matter more in the classroom, I want to, instead, reorient the conversation away from pedagogy as conflict and competition between teachers and students vying for control.

Teachers have assets themselves to contribute, surely, but I wonder to what extent teachers can understand themselves as having something to contribute *while at the same time* maintaining an awareness of the critical problems of their contribution as figures of authority. That's what sincerity, of the type theorized in New Sincerity literature, might look like in the classroom: attempting to act sincerely while also “never being certain whether you are sincere, and whether your struggle to transcend narcissism, solipsism, irony, and insincerity is even undertaken in good faith” (Kelly, 2016, p. 204-205). What I mean is: sincere pedagogy, as I try to think with it here, is an inherently uncertain mode of teaching, one that maintains hope while asserting the need for criticality, one that brings the self affirmatively into community with others even though the project is always already fraught, one that promises to try to tell the truth to students despite the problems or impossibilities of doing so. Sincerity is a belief in the promise of the (critical) teacher and what that affords students; it is not naïve or willful ignorance of the problematics of power, prejudice, history, and imposition.

As an example, I draw below on one of my own experiences with text selection in the English classroom, an issue long fraught by critique for the ways it blatantly reifies the violence of white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, colonialism, etc. I agree, and I attempt to show in what follows how, in addition to the truths those critiques point out, text selection can also mobilize students towards something else: setting them on generative trajectories of their own. In doing so, I hope to illustrate the mechanics of thinking with sincerity, of the type outlined in the literature above, in the context of a classroom. I provide both critical and affirmative readings of the anecdote in keeping with an understanding that a New Sincerity might embrace both of those approaches.

Teaching a Favorite Text

How odd I can have all this inside me and to you it's just words.
—David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King*

I'm not sure I've ever been as excited to teach anything as I was to teach Cormac McCarthy's (1991) *All the Pretty Horses* for the first time. When I need to talk about how literature became so important to me, I tell the story of encountering McCarthy's virtuosic coming-of-age tale of life on the Texas-Mexico border. My father gave me the book—importantly, not my teacher—and I alternately reveled and struggled through it on my own time, finding in it more compelling alternatives to the bloodless parochial-school curricula I'd been subjected to my whole (brief) life. I saw the prison-hardened protagonist, John Grady, with his laconic confidence, somehow containing all the literary philosophizing of McCarthy and his stand-in, the matriarch Alfonsa, gallantly a-horseback, violently in love—which is to say I saw my idealized self. What I learned from reading *All the Pretty Horses* at 17 years old, an apathetic if bright student, was that literature and its appeal were larger than what my high school teachers offered. McCarthy's novel introduced me to the “glowing orchard” of literature; like John Grady, I felt myself a thief “newly loosed in that dark electric...loosely jacketed against the cold and ten thousand worlds for the choosing” (p. 30).

I assumed, naively maybe, that my students would have similar experiences to the one I'd had: transformative, enthralling, electric. It would make (literary) readers of them. They were high school juniors, as I had been; this was in Brownsville, Texas, even closer to the border than I was

growing up in Dallas. And they were nearly all fluently bilingual, having grown up Mexican American on both sides of the border. All of which should've made, I thought, *All the Pretty Horses* a hit. As it turned out, most of them struggled through the unit: discussions dragged, essays underwhelmed, many clearly didn't do the reading at all. The unit was, in that sense, a disappointment, and I felt I'd failed at the time. But there were successes too. One student, Carlos, passionately defended the text amid criticism from his peers during our discussions. And on the last day of the unit, he stayed after class to ask for something to read next; I remember giving him my copy of Vonnegut's (1959) *The Sirens of Titan*.

Reading Pedagogy Sincerely

In taking up the lens of the New Sincerity, I'll read the example above both critically and affirmatively. Looking back on it now, there's clearly a nostalgia at work that lends itself to an immediate critique. I gave those students the book that had mattered most to me, when I was their age. In doing so, I projected a future in which they connected with the book and were launched on similar trajectories as my own. Such nostalgia is, of course, idealistic and naïve—I grew up a nine-hour drive north of Brownsville, in suburban Dallas, and as such, my community had little in common with the largely bilingual and ethnically fluid borderland of the Rio Grande Valley.¹⁰ I also largely missed the point of who the work of teaching should be for: my students. Instead, I participated in the problematic reproduction of Canonical literature, offering students a novel¹¹ by a straight, white, male, American author, about a straight, white, male protagonist (a cowboy!), that falls squarely within a masculinist tradition of the Western literary Canon, which can be traced back through Faulkner and Hemingway and Joyce and Dostoevsky all the way to Shakespeare and the Bible.¹² Through a critical lens, then, this example constitutes a familiar moment in a long line of problematically uncritical reproduction. My students were encouraged by my teaching and the text I put in front of them to receive (read: conserve) knowledge that their forebears felt they deserved; that is, they were inducted (read: indoctrinated) into an Anglo-European, literary culture long privileged despite the systemic violence wrought by that very culture—the erasure of so many black and brown voices, queer voices, indigenous voices, the sanitization of the few deemed acceptably unthreatening, the elevation of the white, male voice at the center of it all as the epitome of genius rather than of tyranny, violence, and oppression. If I, as the teacher, had gotten out of my own way and avoided the temptation of teaching a book I loved, I might have avoided these problems and instead chosen a text that better attended to who my students were, then—or better yet, let them choose the text.

Understanding this anecdote through the lens of the New Sincerity, though, means remaining open to the critical reading above—and to its importance in the work of pedagogy—while also considering the ways the text I brought in, my beloved teenage novel, might have mattered, affirmatively, to those students. On the opening page of his memoir, Eggers (2001) writes:

First of all:
I am tired.
I am true of heart!

And also:
 You are tired.
 You are true of heart!

Taking these lines as a type of mantra for a sincere approach to pedagogy suggests the importance of the teacher (I) in the context of this story, enthusiastically affirming that the teacher is indeed sincere (“true of heart”). But importantly, Eggers immediately points to the other, the You: for him, the reader; for myself (as the teacher in this example), my student. If a New Sincerity is located anywhere, it has to be located, as Kelly (2016) explains, “intersubjectively” (p. 199), in the relational space across writer and reader or teacher and student. From the teacher’s perspective, my sharing this novel, which resonated so strongly with me, is another way of asking Wallace’s (2001) question in “Octet,” for Kelly (2016) a central New Sincerity text: “This thing I feel, I can’t name it straight out but it seems important, do you feel it too?” (p. 131).

What I’m interested in, then, is the way the book resonated in this story with Carlos, too. That he came to me after class to ask for a recommendation speaks to the potential of sincerity as a generative approach to teaching. What appeals, I think, about the promise of telling the truth about yourself to your students, in spite—or perhaps because of the critiques noted above—is that sincerity *propels*. In Eggers’ (2003) second novel, two young men travel quite literally around the world with the aim of giving away a windfall settlement received after a friend’s death. They feel, too much, the weight of loss; sincerity becomes a way of moving on:

- Nobody told me about the weight. Why didn’t our parents tell us about the weight?
- What weight?
- The fucking weight, Hand. How does the woman Ingres live? The one from Marrakesh? If we’re vessels, and we are, then we, you and I, are overfull, and that means she’s at the bottom of a deep cold lake. How can she stand the hissing of all that water?
- We are not vessels; we are missiles.
- We’re static and we’re empty. We are overfull and leaden.
- We are airtight and we are missiles and all-powerful. (p. 315)

Playful use of missile-as-metaphor aside,¹³ Eggers’ project with respect to sincerity is about, to use his word, *velocity*: the direction we come to move in and the speed with which we go. Carlos asked for another novel to read, a recommendation from my own experience. It mobilized him as a reader and writer, em-powering him as he moved on from that class. As his teacher, I recognize, like Eggers’ characters, that “there is a chance that everything [I] did was incorrect, but stasis is itself criminal for those with the means to move, and the means to weave communion between people” (p. 298). So sincerity in pedagogy preserves and acts upon the promise of moving students, of affirmatively pushing them onward, of weaving communion between us and them, when we try to tell the truth—when we share who we are, as truly as we can—even when doing so is problematic and especially since, as critique via theory has taught us, any action is inevitably problematic, is essentially an imposition:

Even good and democratic teachers...impose their views. Such an imposition is inevitable; it derives from the very act of teaching, of making choices among a variety of possible learning opportunities for one’s students; choices that advance some knowledge, knowing, and knowers over others. (Segall, 2002, p. 98)

For teachers, sincerity in pedagogy takes the “all this inside me” Wallace references above and concretizes it, making it matter in the doubled-sense to students, as more than just words. Or, put differently, sincerity calls teachers to ask themselves the question Eggers asks at the end of his third novel, *What is the What* (2006), a question that reminds the teacher of the presence of the teacher’s self and its value in the work of pedagogy: “All the while I will know that you are there. How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist” (p. 535).

Thought differently, we might consider what sincerity offers teachers with regard to facilitating critical engagement in the sharing of the teacher’s self sincerely. We may actually make critique more possible by foregrounding truths as teachers, promising to share them as honestly as we can (e.g., our politics), because in putting things on the table, these truths become discursive matter for students to perhaps more easily and openly contend with. Framing a set of political values as representative of the teacher in front of them encourages students to understand that political expression situatedly, as connected to the teacher’s life and experiences, particular perspective and culture, and biases and prejudices. Such connections are essential to teaching the things critique helps us to see—how power operates in varying ways, as a manifestation of privileges and forces working on and through all of us. Moreover, in sharing sincerely, rather than, say, hypothetically, pedagogy becomes relational work—in the process of grappling with the teacher’s sincere thoughts, students are establishing relational ties, even if they’re antagonistic. Sincerity of this kind, then, becomes a way for teachers to assert, as Egan (2010) does in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, “that we have some history together that hasn’t happened yet” (p. 345). This is work that understands that “teaching is building educational relations” (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004, p. 7); that asks—relentlessly in the wake of Theory’s revelations of schooling as an incorrigibly violent, colonial, racist, and oppressive project—“why do schools remain if not for meeting?” (p. 5).

Conclusions, Or, You Shall Know Our Velocity!

That we don’t know,
but try anyway.
—Alecia Beymer, “In the attempt”

To end, I offer two considerations provoked by this thinking of sincerity and pedagogy that may help going forward. The first is that sincere teaching, of the type that insists on critique while also preserving hope, may require an ontological, rather than representational, orientation towards pedagogy. What I mean is that, given the obvious contradictions, it may not be possible to represent sincerity in writing—with language, as the New Sincerity authors attest to—and, thus, in this essay or curriculum; that is, it’s not a form of rational knowledge but rather something that we can only make sense of ontologically. Huehls (2016), in his discussion of literature *After Critique*, suggests that fiction authors might achieve their sincere ends—to “establish connection, produce sympathy, trigger change, affect the world”—not by “showing and revealing the world to us, but by being in the world with us” (p. 24). Or, to return to the preservice teachers I began this essay with, when asked what they thought constituted sincere teaching, they said they didn’t know *how* to say it, but they knew it when it happened. Thus, sincerity might need to be thought of outside of language

and representation; nonrepresentational approaches to pedagogy (e.g., Leander & Boldt, 2012; McKenzie, 2017; Smith, 2016) may prove useful in this regard.

A second trajectory involves recognizing, as Hungerford (2012) points out in an essay on the pedagogical implications of Eggers' sincere fiction, that:

School is not structured by love and friendship. Love and friendship are marked as the affective outside of the classroom, banished by the formality of pedagogical authority, by the commitment to impersonality as a literary critical good and as an intersubjective norm among the strangers sitting together in the classroom. (p. 655)

For Eggers, this is precisely the problem we face today, in writing and in pedagogy. As Hungerford notes, Eggers has pushed back against this in his writing (e.g., 2001, 2003, 2006), but more intriguingly for our purposes here, he's also done so in other venues, establishing a network of tutoring centers (826National), a publishing house structured around those commitments (McSweeney's), and a literary magazine grounded in a sincere ethos (*The Believer*). Eggers' school of "uncritical reading" (Warner, 2004, as quoted in Hungerford, 2012, p. 654) might serve as inspiration and sites of empirical study of what it means to teach sincerely, attempting to concretize the belief that "reading and writing [and teaching] are inseparable from the emotionally freighted relationships of love and friendship" (p. 653).

At the culmination of the English methods course referenced at the beginning of this piece, I asked students to write personal essays that said, "something substantive about yourself and where you're at now, as a person." Providing epigraphs from New Sincerity authors, I invited them to pair their essays with photographs and told them we'd share the writing on the last day of class. I told them I would write one too, as did the other instructor. What I wanted to say came easily, but for my co-teacher it did not. She grappled with what exactly she wanted to say to students before they left and how she might do so sincerely. In the end, she wrote a poem about failure and impossibility, describing what she'd learned from students—that as teachers, we don't know, but try anyway. Sincerity offers one way for educators and scholars, steeped in theory and critique, to move on in the attempt, uncertainly, critically, hopefully, to make the self's velocity known (Eggers, 2003), with the promise of teaching truths that matter to others and ourselves.

Notes

1. Conversely, students bring so much stuff of their own to the encounter as well. Throughout this essay, I focus on the sharing of the teacher's self as a sincere form of pedagogy, which is not to dismiss or downplay the importance of foregrounding students' selves—their lived experiences, identities, out-of-school practices, etc.—in the work of teaching, English or otherwise. More on this dynamic will be discussed later in the paper.
2. Or thoroughly contaminated, as it were.
3. Here, I interpolate lines from Ada Limon's (2015) poem "I Remember the Carrots," which the student chose as well in the collage above. Throughout this essay, I attempt to practice some of what I preach with respect to sincerity, bringing in textual matter that composes my self and my thinking, what matters to me (as well as to my students, in this case) into the writing in order to make the case more sincerely.
4. I'm moving fast through literary theory, here, I know. Briefly: The New Critics practiced a formalist brand of literary analysis, placing emphasis on the text itself and its formal qualities rather than contextual factors like the author's biography, or the particularities of the reader, etc. For better and worse, depending on who you talk to, New Criticism rose to prominence in the academy and has endured as a pedagogical approach—if nothing else, it is highly teachable—and that trickled down into secondary education; much has been made (e.g., Blake & Lunn,

1986; Santa Maria, 1999; Thomas, 2012) of the New Criticism at the heart of framings of reading in the Common Core and AP curricula, for example.

5. These preoccupations are additionally characterized as indicative of a New Sincerity movement in the arts broadly, including in music (e.g., Arcade Fire, Cat Power, Joanna Newsom, Neutral Milk Hotel, Sufjan Stevens), television (*The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*) and film (the movies of Wes Anderson & Sofia Coppola), which all (though any such grouping is obviously uneven) embrace sincerity as a possible antidote to cynicism engendered by modern life. For the sake of this essay, I constrain my focus to how the notion has been taken up in literature and literary theory, as it's been most thoroughly worked through there.
6. Rather than resort to the tired cliché that engagement with both approaches would be “beyond the scope of this paper” (though that's true) and that it's a conversation that “deserves more space than I can provide here,” etc. I'll be upfront—sincere, even—and say that, as a thinker, it's the latter, pessimistic strain that has proved more resonant in my own experience, and so it serves as the focus as I read through my anecdote vis-à-vis sincerity. The cynicism engendered by that pessimistic critique when taken to its extreme, in which everything gets deconstructed and all foundations stripped away, all values questioned, as a lens through which to see everything, as a way of life—that messed me up, as a teacher and a scholar and a person, and that's reason enough for me to want to think with it. But also, conveniently, it's exactly the cynicism wrought by theory that New Sincerity fiction responds to. On the surface, it's a pre-occupation with language in crisis, how to write with words after it's been exposed that “it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say” (Foucault, 1994, p. 9); and there is no “pure signified” (Derrida, 1997, p. 159) that lies behind or beyond words. But more broadly, New Sincerity writers are concerned with, as Wallace memorably put it, “what it means to be a fucking human being” (as cited in McCaffery, 1993, p. 4) in a postmodern world where Truth is rendered impossible, and genuine, authentic connection with another a farce. These fictions are preoccupied over and over again with moral questions, about how to live meaningfully in a world in which certain ways of thinking (theory) have left them without a ground on which to stand.
7. Or rather, in the beginning—McCarthy is a longtime favorite, but no New Sincerist.
8. “Symptomology” here refers to a popular critical mode, rooted in the theory of Louis Althusser among other Marxists, “of interpretation that assumes that a text's truest meaning lies in what it does not say, describes textual surfaces as superfluous, and seeks to unmask hidden meanings texts possess... meanings that are veiled, latent, all but absent if it were not for their irrepressible and recurring symptoms” (Best & Marcus, 2009, p. 1). See also: Jameson (1991).
9. I am conscious here of the pressure put on this term by recent theoretical movements associated with nonrepresentational theory and the posthuman turn. It's worth admitting, then, that the New Sincerity is still a representational project (Huehls, 2016) that centers the human, albeit not so much in a rigid Cartesian sense; this is representationalism that pushes against the very limits of representation; it's writing with the knowledge of writing's inevitable partiality.
10. Not to mention differences in class, ethnicity, even the time period of my high school years and theirs, among, many, many other reasons why such a conflation doesn't make much sense.
11. The form of the novel itself may be a problem for the way it's been privileged historically. A growing body of education scholarship takes this critique even further to the privileging of textual matter itself, seeking to redress the centering of text in classrooms by pointing to the possibilities for new, multimodal literacies (e.g., New London Group, 2000).
12. It should be noted, however, that my thinking at the time was that the geographic overlap of the school I taught in and the novel's setting, as well as McCarthy's occasional use of untranslated Spanish, made it a fit with those particular students.
13. Admittedly, it's hard to put this aside, as if the metaphorical weaponization of students were no big deal. We know too well that it is and how literal that weaponization can be. But perhaps, strangely, that makes it useful here—it is a metaphor that unavoidably invites critique; it cannot escape its own deconstruction, and that's actually pretty apt for saying what I'm trying to say—that if the ideas represented in New Sincerity fiction are to be useful or compelling or worthwhile rendered in/as pedagogy, it will be because they can't attempt that escape; they're too close to it.

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