

Portfolio 1: Familiar Essay Final Version

Essay Description

For this exploratory (or familiar) essay, bring your scene, at least two texts, and your thought-reflections together to develop a complex idea about writing. What can you tell us that's new, that hasn't already been said, and that isn't obvious? Use the exercises as building blocks towards your own complicated idea. Use the texts you choose to complicate your thinking, question your thinking, or turn your thinking; create movement through your texts and your thought-reflections about them.

Your evidence for this essay so far will more than likely consist of your initial scene, texts, and thought-reflections. In all likelihood, you will need to extend your reflections to create a complex idea, build a satisfying beginning, and an ending that moves to significance. Feel free to use additional scenes, texts, and visual sources to build your idea.

You also need to think about structure, order, and organization again. The sample essays by Nandagopalen, Chen, Hennessey, and Sui, the student writers, all include scenes, but each writer uses the scene differently in her work. Don't organize your essay by the sequence of exercises you've done; think about how best to show us your evidence and your thinking throughout the middle of your essay. Build towards your complex idea, and remember that professional writers often move large chunks of text, add chunks, and delete chunks, always in service of their ideas. DO NOT write a five-paragraph essay with a thesis; study the professional writers and note that they never repeat themselves—and they end up in a different place than where they began, even though they remain on the same subject throughout their essays.

You are required to use at least one scene and a minimum of two texts from the list given in Exercise 1.2. (You are not graded on the number of texts you use over the minimum, but on the quality of the thought-reflection and idea you create with them. Using two texts thoughtfully is better than using five inappropriately.) You are also required to include a Works Cited list and in-text citations in MLA format.

Length: 4 to 6 double-spaced pages, 12-point Times or Times New Roman font.

From Fermata to Overture

I set the rinsed beaker in my hand down and reach for another, movements legato: rhythmic, mechanic, known. Lethargically, I glance over the assignment instructions on the blackboard: Answer all lab questions and round off to the nearest decimal. “Be clinical, succinct, and devoid of emotion,” might as well be written underneath it. The last ashy beaker passes through greying water, and I set it in the drawer, lined up perfectly with the others. With a click, I close locker 145.

I sweep my belongings into my bag and slip from the room, unnoticed. The halls are damp, the clack of my shoes reverberating in the stillness until I reach the door. I press my hand to the fogged glass and lay my forehead beside it. The steady thrum of rain plays a backdrop to my sigh, as I follow the raindrops with my fingertip. One, four, five, I count, before bracing myself for the onslaught.

The pressure against my skin comes not just from the rain but also from the expectations of those around me. This pressure is heavy, dampening my spirits just as fiercely as the storm soaks my skin. But what am I supposed to do? How do you fight expectation? In Paulo Freire’s, “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” he explains the concept of “banking” in relation to education. In this process, he compares students to vessels or, more aptly, empty bank accounts, to be filled with empty concepts. Freire explains that, “Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor”(72). They are expected, in this practice, to be of lesser intellect and understanding, and are meant to simply sit and absorb the teachings bestowed upon them. The students are meant, therefore, not to actively think for themselves, but to sink into the demands of others.

But what Freire does not explain is that, sometimes, education isn't the only form of depositing. It can come from other places, more immediate places, places where it is difficult to fight back. Sometimes it is the non-educational banking that controls us most. My extended family told me that I would never be successful or happy if I followed my dreams because, deep down, "no one wants to starve for their art." I was pressed into their hopes and deposited into an account, sorted and filed to fit their aspirations. In this, I was not just a 'bank' but also a bill. I became the receipt of someone else's life goals, and ideals, because I was too scared to stand my ground. Somewhere in the manipulation, somewhere in the midst of monotony, I lost myself. And, instead of trying to find the pieces of myself that went missing, I let someone else's words define me.

When I think back on who I used to be, the girl who found inspiration and music in the spaces between lightning and thunder, who found comfort and poetic symbolism in the whirlpool of soft, dark colours, I remember joy. I remember running through puddles, kicking up a splash in euphoric joy as a child, boundless with wonder and energy. I remember watching the rain fall in fascination, tapping out its rhythm on guitar strings with one hand and writing down its appearance with the other. Vividly, achingly, I remember poems of bright, sunrise yellow raincoats, of dazzling violet umbrellas, and the warmth of soothing tea after dancing in the rain. And I remember the girl who fell in love with the world, the words it had to offer and the voice it became for her. But, she is too far above me, her vibrancy indiscernible, as I gaze up from the chasm into I had plummeted. I fear I can never reach the person I used to be. I was pushed, pressured, and banked, until my own words felt copyrighted and everything I am became a receipt of who I used to be.

I started thinking, amidst my fall into this depression, that perhaps falling in line with what they had to say, falling into conformity, instead of fighting it, could help me understand myself. In Mark Doty's "Souls on Ice," he speaks about the comfort he tried to find in "our commonness" with each other (41). In his grief over the loss of his partner, he attempts to convince himself that the collective life can offer him consolation. In this, he speaks of how the collective world moves on despite our losses, and how we can potentially draw comfort from the fact that we won't be stagnant forever, won't be suffering forever. He explains that he tried to convince himself that, "beauty lies in the whole and that, therefore death, the loss of the part, is not so bad—is in, fact, almost nothing"(Doty 41). He admits that he disagrees with this thinking, and that all our attempts to convince ourselves are useless because the world is not as simple as we would hope. However, he does find slight consolation in the fact that despite personal "erasures," the common life can continue (Doty 41). It is faintly comforting to him to lose himself to the collective, to conform, in the face of loss.

I thought, maybe, when faced with the loss of my identity that I, too, could find consolation in assimilation. However, to me, conformity was a curse dressed as a blessing. The pressure around me made me feel as though I had to conform, and that by giving in, there would be a way to ease the stress of constantly pushing against the box I had been banked into. But, for me, giving in would not be a consolation to an "erasure" or loss in my life but a means to erase me completely, because, unlike Doty, the death in my life was not the death of a loved one, but the death of the self (41). There was no comfort for me, in my obsolescence, and it offered me no respite to know that I could be completely lost to world without anyone noticing. Doty does mention that he would prefer to be an individual, but his experiences have shown him that it doesn't seem to work,

despite his attempts (41). Is this to say, then, that our attempts are fruitless? Should we just give in immediately to alleviate the stress, the pain, and pressure individuality brings? I tried letting myself be taken into the collective and I felt much worse than I ever had fighting to be an individual. Giving up what made me feel alive was not worth being part of a group, and was certainly not comforting. An artist strives to be innovative, to be creative, original. And, for someone with art and music, writing and poetry so entrenched in my soul, losing it was like losing myself. I was still physically here, but what made me “iridesce” was fading beneath the smothering pressure of people holding me to their standards and ideals (Doty 41).

But the thing about pressure is that there is always a breaking point. The more you shove someone down, the more force used to contain her, the worse the aftershock of the eruption becomes. The backlash is incredible. The inevitable snap of my patience, of my willingness to fall in line, was the spark of an atom striking another – quick burning and effervescent. And though everyone seemed to remind me that I chose this path, this equation-heavy program, no one seemed to remember the hands, insisting, pressing on my back, laden with heavy, restricting words: there is no future in art, in self-expression, and you should have no part in it. But maybe I want no part in a future without art. For I’ve seen the world through calculating, methodical eyes, and it is not a sight I long for. Even if no one was truly listening yet, I still had a voice. I just had to remind myself how to use it.

Writing would become my voice for the voiceless, my peace and my salvation. And giving myself back into it, planting my feet in my own ideals, would become my groundwork back to self-purpose. I reached my building; my room was warm, dry clothes an inviting cocoon, as I sat at my desk to start my assignment. The rain was a steady

drumbeat against the window and I found myself drawn to it, staring blankly at the questions before me, questions in which wonderment, joy, and creativity are all reduced to chemical formulae. But how can detached, impersonal formulae hope to encapsulate human emotion? How can effervescent elation be minimized and equated to the release of endorphins? Instead of mathematical answers, I find that I've filled the work page with words; flowery words describing feeling, and from top to bottom, poetry and lyrics fill the gaps between questions. Suddenly, like Doty and the mackerel that arrested his thoughts in the market, I am struck by the image before me (39). Here is something so simple, yet it is something that my imagination is aching for, reaching for with wide-splayed hands.

Surely no formula could explain this feeling. How coming back to my passions, to the roots of my identity, felt like coming home. I finally let my own ideas, and my own writing, become my primary language. In Amy Tan's essay, "Mother Tongue," she mentions how her mother's English was something "perfectly clear, perfectly natural" because it was the language she'd heard from her mother her whole life (7). It was intrinsic, it was her 'mother's tongue,' something so natural, so essential, and so easy for her to understand. Falling back into my creative roots, expressing my own voice and ideas, became my "mother tongue"(Tan 7). It became the language and groundwork of who I wanted to be.

Building these ideals around myself, banking my own thoughts into my system, became the stepping-stones I used to climb from my chasm. And, when I looked outside the window, I noticed the rain beginning to break up, sunlight spreading through the clouds in bright, golden patches. Outside, there was a group of young children crashing through puddles, their bright red rain boots a stark contrast to the grey sleet beneath them. They noticed me leaning against the window and one of them waved. I waved back, and I

swore I could almost see myself in their euphoric, mirthful expressions. I am not the girl I used to be. But perhaps the gap between her and I is not as insurmountable as I had once thought. I was starting to remember what it felt like to be alive. Coming back into writing became the foundation upon which I rebuilt my identity, my world.

In the world, society is ever changing. Culture is evolving continuously, but at its roots, the deepest, most integral parts of it, it is non-conforming. We would have lost so many valued traditions had culture gave in to the pressures of an adapting society. Maybe, instead of focusing on conforming and resisting, we should be searching for a *balance* and sharing in mutual ideologies but differing identities. Freire's work shows that he believes working together can change the minds of the world and, while Doty believes we *can* find peace in commonality, it is also the paradox of being both an individual and part of a whole that drives us forward. We tend to be so focused on the division of creativity and conformity that we lose sight of the bigger picture. There can be merit to the collective mind, the collective ambition, in moderation. It is all a matter of language, of writing, of self-expression. If we allow ourselves to share thoughts and work through collaboration, not assimilation, maybe we can create movements that both draw us together and allow us individual growth. If we, like Tan mentioned, can look beyond the words being said and instead look at our language, our voices, as a means to speak of our intents, our passions, we can create together while still reaffirming our own identities (8).

Culture manages to change continuously and yet still hold its values faithfully, indefinitely. Self-expression should fight to achieve this. My writing should fight to achieve this. *We* should fight to achieve this. We should strive to be ever shaping, ever growing, and yet still hold our passions, our hopes and our dreams, close to our hearts. I want to be able to be changed and challenged throughout the years of my life, but never

give up what makes me who I am. We should fight to belong just as fiercely as we should fight to be different. A group of diverse personalities with differing minds and creative potentials is much more influential than a collective, robotic, single-minded movement.

Using our knowledge together, sharing our dreams instead of forcing them upon people, and not giving in to the dominant mindset, will allow us freedom. We just have to hold on to what ever it is that makes us feel alive and, like Freire theorized, understand that we are a work-in-progress, a “process”, always searching (75). Like Doty, we must strive to be struck by the most mundane of things and never let ourselves lose that sense of awe and captivation. We must find peace in our knowledge that we have limitations, and that discovering our identities will be arduous and not easily defined. Writing is part of me, intrinsically, and I know now that I cannot live, fully, without it. There may not be a manual for self-discovery but there are many forms of identity and many ways to find yourself. I’ve found that writing is my soul; it is my happiness, my primary language and my voice. Understanding who I am, as I grow, as I am pushed and pulled in every conceivable direction, comes from picking up a pen, and pouring out my heart. And knowing, unconditionally, that even if no one is listening, I still have a voice: I still have an identity.

Works Cited

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