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Painful Conversions: Reading and Writing Education Reform in Louisiana

Thomas George Sowders

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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PAINFUL CONVERSIONS: READING AND WRITING EDUCATION
REFORM IN LOUISIANA

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

Thomas George Sowders

B.A., North Carolina State University, 2004

M.A., University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2007

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ABSTRACT

In January 2013, the superintendent of a rural Louisiana school system initiated a plan to increase school choice in his district through the implementation of a new virtual magnet school and the conversion of an existing elementary school into a magnet school. Both plans were set into action in April 2013. This study uses performative writing to document the better part of a year spent engaged in this project as a contracted educational consultant. Melding William Blake's theories of apocalypse and social metonymy with experimental modes of scholarly production as praxis, I theorize education reform as an interactive performance. By exploring themes of documentation, collaboration, and dialogic education, this project identifies the documentation of personal experience in school reform as a temporal mode of generating meaning and offers this mode as a pedagogical model for future scholarship.

SECTION 1. INTRODUCTION

This project differs from many other performative critical projects in that it does not seek to invert the hierarchy of telling-to-showing that pervades traditional criticism but instead give equal consideration to critical objectivity and its impossibility. In other words, my dissertation does not only transmit meaning through the posing of abstruse problems: Rather, it informs *and* performs, creating meaning through temporal unfolding. Most important to this project is that the reader maintains cognizance of the reader-writer interaction necessary to the production of meaning, in a process Louise Rosenblatt calls a *transaction*.

In the view of Rosenblatt, “text has no meaning in and of itself, but gains meaning only when a reader transacts with it. It is in transaction, in which readers shape new text based on their experiences, and the text shapes the readers’ sense of themselves, that meaning, simultaneously social and personal, is made” (45).

Cognizance of the transaction between reader and object (text, media, culture, history) lets a performative dissertation work on the reader’s imagination in order to generate meaning. What is a performative dissertation? In Section II, I explain how Mary Poovey, the historian of genre, helps us understand how the generic conventions of “traditional” academic writing have developed since the mid 19th century. Revealing the history of genre helps call the conventions of traditional academic discourse into question. Della Pollock associates generic hierarchies with oppressive social forces and interrogates the way that language *acts*, performing as well as informing, as she argues that knowledge is always jointly produced. Ronald Pelias argues for the value of subjectivity and extralinguistic experiential knowledge and describes the responsibilities and risks taken by academic performative writers. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls for increased experimentation and reflectiveness in the modalities of critical writing. The theorists of

performative writing addressed in the next section all finally agree that the value of academic performative writing is directly related to its social usefulness.

As social usefulness becomes the purpose of the performative dissertation, so does social usefulness itself become an object of study, since this is, finally, a study of education reform in Louisiana. It would not be enough to carefully construct a long diagnosis of the ailments and achievements of public education: Every step in the narrative performance that composes the creative center of this study gains traction through its commitment to social usefulness. The theorists of performative writing mentioned above provide instructions for a praxis tied to generating experiential knowledge. In order to achieve a different praxis tied to real action in the real world in the real realm of public education reform, this study relies on the social theories conveyed through the late poetry of William Blake.

In Section III, contextualizing Blake with epistemological ontologists allows the critic to argue for the importance of Blake's concept of apocalypse in the history of western thought and to set an ethical basis from which action in the realm of education reform can be taken. It will be shown that William Blake was an artist and a fabricator of illuminated poems etched into copper through an inventive and laborious process. Although there is so much to distract from the signified content of the textual component of his creative labor, Blake is also regarded and contextualized as a major philosophical thinker. In fact, Plato, Benedict di Spinoza, and Blake all theorize reality as a state that could change. In their epistemological-ontological arguments, all three major philosophers describe the possibility for humans to transcend lower-order reality into higher-order reality. A painful conversion must take place in order for one state of reality to become another.

After demonstrating the way Blake fits into the long history of thinking past what can be sensed, it will become clear, through a critical summary of Blake's mythopoeia, that a social theory of education is central to Blake's work. To further elucidate Blake's implied educational theory, an explication of the intellectual kinship between Paolo Freire's educational theory and Blake's mythopoeia will be provided.

It will be shown that Blake challenges his imagined reader to create an educative artifact that will transmit Blake's most urgent values: Mutual forgiveness, imagination, and invention. Section IV documents the personal experience of an educational reformer in a public school district. This documentary section is performative in that documented personal experience provides experiential understanding through its temporal unfolding. More specifically, in Section IV, an introduction to the concept of blended learning leads to the documentation of its implementation, and this, in turn, leads the critic to realize how blended learning participates in a larger social project to divert public education funds to private companies. By documenting interactions with people who shape public education daily in Broussard Parish, and through the process of being assigned major education reform tasks, learning how to complete them, executing them, and, finally, assessing results of these actions, the reader becomes able to use her or his own experience to make meaning from the performance. The experiences documented are not limited to interactions with people and places. Transactions between critic and educative objects, like books on educational theory also generate meaning and help shape the narrative.

A series of digressions break up the narrative of Section IV. Intermittently and incrementally, background information is given on the history of educational reform and the origins and implementation of No Child Left Behind. The reformer-performer's perception of how public education is changing because of new technologies, centralized standards, high

stakes accountability, popular representations of education, and the rhetoric of choice is offered in order to inspire a transaction with the reader, from which knowledge can be generated and future action taken. To *show* how the personal interests of individuals compose the landscape of education reform, the critic performs the Blakean concept of self-interest (the Spectre, in Blake) and offers documentation of his imaginings of how he might use the documented experiences for personal benefit. Experiential moments are juxtaposed with digressions on Blake's symbology, inviting the reader to participate in the generation of ideas about the way the reformer-performer's experiences validate or violate Blake's theory of social liberation.

SECTION 2. PERFORMATIVE WRITING: STORIES THAT CAN BE USED

“Liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information.” –Paolo Freire

The creative center of this dissertation is a performative documentary about the PhD student’s experience working on major educational reform projects in a rural school district in Louisiana. Each day, the student encounters utterances and visual objects that recall major topics of education reform. For example, one cool and humid afternoon in late winter, the PhD student travels to a high school that has been shut down for five years. It was a “failing” school, according to rubric of success generated after No Child Left Behind. The place hasn’t had youth in the halls in a long time. There’s an infestation of lady bugs in one stairwell. The decorations have all been taken down. There are only a few objects in the building. A couple notebooks of student writing that no one ever picked up. A molding library full of books and file cabinets with newspaper cut-outs featuring black cultural leaders. Upstairs, in a computer lab that still has about fifteen computers in it, on the wall, colorful letters are taped, spelling out “No Child Left Behind.” In that moment it occurs to me that to be as effective as desired, my scholarship must involve some element of “showing.” In order to generate emotional understanding, the PhD student would have to take his reader to this computer lab, take the reader to the district’s central office, take the reader to the halls. Performative scholarship seemed an arduous but necessary path to take, even if many scholars are not yet used to it.

Mary Poovey has led recent critical discussions on experimental criticism and established herself as a historian of genre. Her work helps us understand how the generic conventions of “traditional” academic writing have developed since the mid 19th century, and she elucidates the pervasiveness of New Criticism’s generic legacy. Della Pollock also associates generic

hierarchies with oppressive social forces, although Pollock's work has become seminal to discourse on performative writing because of the way it extends some of the same theories explored by Poovey in order to interrogate the way that language *acts*. Like Wayne C. Booth and J. L. Austin, Pollock acknowledges that all writing performs as well as informs, and she logically concludes that academic writing self-conscious of the way its form conveys meaning offers a much needed recognition of the fact that knowledge is always jointly produced and produced in relation to both spatial/metaphorical information and temporal unfolding. Ronald Pelias argues for the value of subjectivity and extralinguistic experiential knowledge and describes the responsibilities and risks taken by academic performative writers. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes that "As the ambitions of literary criticism become more expansive and searching under the influence of deconstruction, feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, popular culture, and liberatory theoretical movements around race, colonialism, and sexuality, there is increased room for experimentation and reflectiveness in the modalities of critical writing, as well" (105). All finally agree that the value of academic performative writing is directly related to its social usefulness.

According to Poovey, performative writing has origins in the academic movements of the 1960s and 1970s that performed a devaluation of essentialist ontology through the critical practice of deconstruction, which, in general, was a collective reaction to the notion of literary criticism as a "business" that had, following the model of the sciences, traded in logocentrism in order to justify and stabilize its place in the academy (Poovey 109). Practitioners of performative writing are able to claim a wide array of influence—movements in gender studies, psychoanalysis, and, increasingly, performance studies—but for Poovey the roots of experimental criticism lie in a collective repudiation of the Arnoldian binary of novelistic and

critical objectivity. Matthew Arnold (and many other mid-nineteenth century critics) argued that the critic's job was to *tell* and the novelist's to *show* and that the tasks were necessarily *separate* (Poovey 123). Following this trend, "critical objectivity" was argued to be the critic's goal in the 1880s by Henry James and later by T.S. Eliot, eventually being cemented as the foundation for New Criticism and twentieth-century American literary criticism in general, as the field became professionalized in the expanding U.S. university system (Poovey 113).

In the 1960s, rhetorical theorist Wayne C. Booth, author of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, issued an invective against the notion of critical objectivity and argued that the critics of the 1930s and 1940s espoused critical objectivity and shunned more exciting narrative "worlds" because they wanted to secure their positions in universities and so tried to make a science out of literary criticism (qtd. in Poovey 112). Booth's invective of the notion of critical objectivity became inspiration for critics in the 1980s to begin practicing what Poovey calls "creative criticism," in which the critic interrogates the way language operates to create "the effect of meaning" instead of mining a literary text for reductive, axiomatic "meanings" (Poovey 118).

As Poovey relates, critics of the early 1980s used the language theories of Lacan and Derrida to tease out their own theories of performance and writing that "obliterate the distinction between creative and critical writing" (120). The performative capacity of language had been argued by J. L. Austin, who theorized "speech acts" in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), identifying two categories of utterance: "constatives, which set forward statements of fact, report a state of affairs, or describe situations; and performatives, which perform or carry out acts in the very process of enunciation" (Poovey 120). The binary of constative/performative gives way to the insight that, from a rhetorical point of view, all language participates in the same project of seeming to mean. Performative writing makes this point especially while challenging the

professionally-driven, New Critical assumption that critical objectivity is a) possible and b) deserving of its privileged place in the hierarchy of literary genre. If spatial analysis is recognized to be a critical practice borrowed from the sciences in an effort to professionalize critical writing, we can see the injustice of the exile from the academy of critical writing aware of the *temporal* nature of producing knowledge.

Furthermore, not only is all writing rhetorical, as *The Rhetoric of Fiction* argued, and performative in the sense that it “seems to mean,” as Austin contended, but all writing can be said to be performative because all writing has voice. The voices of traditional criticism had been, prior to the past three decades, generally scientific and uniform. Academic texts performed the part of the “academic”—the meticulously crafted, stoic voice of the objective scientist. Performative writers ask, What happens if the textual voice doesn’t just read a monologue? What if it gives you a dance to interpret? What if it builds settings, creates images? What if it dialogues with other voices, including yours?

The rubric for the traditional academic voice has historically involved the erasure of elements that might distract the reader from the intended transmission of empirical information. For Poovey, this effect, which still (although to a decreasing extent) pervades criticism and stems from outdated professional anxieties, has obscured, among other things, the “complex relationship between temporality and meaning” (123). For Poovey, performative writing implicitly argues that all attempts to make and even to resist meaning are organized by the interaction between spatiality and temporal momentum, which means that meaning is always generated through the dual process of revealing and unfolding, telling and showing (124). New Criticism and its fundamental concern for critical objectivity privileged spatial conceptions of text, breaking apart and re-synthesizing elements of text in order to produce sturdy arguments

about literature; but “performative writing refuses to treat spatializing metaphors as if they are literal and insists instead that reading/writing/understanding occurs in time, as part of the dynamic of loss, recovery, and loss that is also the drama of embodiment” (124). To erase “the drama of embodiment,” for Poovey, is to unnecessarily obscure a crucial aspect of knowledge.

Consider the comparison of what a piece of criticism *is* and what it can *do*. A hypothetical article in an English journal, perhaps, *is* a psychoanalytic study of Blake, but what it *does* is capitulate to the generic hierarchy of critical objectivity over narrative objectivity, which is connected to the hierarchical relationships between spatial/scientific and temporal or experiential meaning. A hypothetical performative dissertation *is* a contribution to a specific field of knowledge, but what it *does* is think past outmoded hierarchies and demonstrate an increasing critical interest in temporal modes of making meaning. Texts perform and act in different ways and in different realms. Performative dissertations create space in which the duality of the abstract and the concrete provides focus to a lens trained on a specific facet of culture—in this case, education reform.

While Poovey has contributed the most to current understandings of how experimentation has been allowed back into the academy, most of the current practitioners of performative writing situate their work in the field of Performance Studies and more specifically allude to Della Pollock, who draws on Kristeva and Adorno to argue that *all* texts perform. For Pollock there is a power in the simple act of identifying with the field of performative writing, acknowledging it simply as “an important, dangerous, and difficult intervention into routine representations of social/performative life” (75-76). Performative writing is inherently explosive in the way it transgresses the “routine” for Pollock, for whom writing doesn’t *mean* things as much as it *does* things, as Austin argued in the 1960s. Especially, for Pollock, performative

writing serves as a kind of creative space where language can be manipulated and tested. Pollock calls for texts that “exceed [their] determinations within structures of absence/presence in order to perform a social function” (76). In other words, the highest priority is given to scholarship that transgresses prescriptive generic boundaries “in order to perform a social function.”

Pollock implies that the functionality of language and its ability to affect the social world is the closest thing to presence language can have. In this light, it becomes necessary to address the potential power of language and to include the awareness of the potential for criticism, like *all* poesis, to directly or indirectly shape real-world action. Critical praxis becomes urgent, as the temporal nature of reality (i.e. consciousness of death, the fundamental aspect of humanity) seems to make anxiety combust into action in moments that I, drawing from Blake, call apocalypse. Emotional stress, usually from conscious or subconscious perceptions of imbalance, spurs us into action. Liberatory education, as I discuss later, involves a combination of information and problem-posing, usually generating awareness of previously obscured social *imbalances* that in turn inspire revolutionary *action*.

Posing problems, more so than only disseminating information, opens an opportunity for intellectual engagement and play. Pollock appreciates and implicitly encourages writing with “analytic flexibility” (75) because the aesthetics of performance pose problems to readers—why am I organized like this? Why do I have red print in some places? Performative writing might *be* a narrative about visiting an archive, but what it *does* is participate in a larger social project of promoting dialogic education, at the heart of which is human empathy.

Pollock shows how performative writing performs its duty, by facilitating and shaping “the interplay of reader and writer in the joint production of meaning” (80). The collaboration between reader and writer, which can escalate to a form of critical intimacy, is emblematic of the

collaboration of paramount concern to educational and performance theorists.¹ Once we see all writing as performative and experimental criticism as justified by the possibilities it holds for social functionality, we can begin to consider the role pleasure plays in jointly-produced meaning. As Poovey writes, “Performative writing ... is the only kind of writing that exists, because all writing, like all utterances, enacts the play of language, which is the endlessly exciting incitement of desire” (Poovey 121). When we allow ourselves to acknowledge the permissibility of pleasure and even its importance in the joint production of knowledge between reader and writer, we are able to increase the effectiveness of our scholarship.

Ronald Pelias also argues for the value of subjectivity and endorses performative writing that offers “an invitation to take another’s perspective,” represented by many recent approaches to creative criticism, including “autoethnography, performative essay, ethnodrama, personal ethnography, autoperformance, and ethnographic poetics” (5). The central argument for Pelias is that all writing utilizes a particular style for rhetorical effect: There is no scholarship that can avoid this. Pelias therefore argues that “Scholars need not be tied to the belief or practice that their scholarship must look a particular way, particularly a paradigmatic way that has its uses but has limited power in accounting for human experience” (6). Style is a tool, and using it is part of the labor of self-conscious performative writing.

As Pelias argues, the labor of scholarship also lies in new negotiations about what material to exclude. Generally, the selection process for documentary writing will be enormously cumbersome, including the responsibility of creating a meticulously intentioned performative mechanism for generating experiential knowledge and the labor of selecting and shaping the experiential knowledge to be shared. He writes that

¹ For more on critical intimacy see Diane P. Freedman, Olivia Frey, and Frances Murphy Zauhar (eds.) in *The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism*.

Performative writing does not indiscriminately record experience; it does not simply duplicate a cinema verite experiment. Instead, performative writing is a selective camera, aimed carefully to capture the most arresting angles. Each frame is studied and felt; each shot is significant. Much is left on the editing floor. Everyday experience, then, is not scholarship, but the *shaping* of everyday experience into telling and moving tales can be. (7, my emphasis)

In other words, although experimental form is welcome as a rhetorical alternative to “formal argument based in and upon the methods of scientific inquiry,” and although the purposeful and controlled presentation of everyday experience is a viable form of scholarship, you can’t just offer *anything* to your reader, call it performative writing, and assume it will earn credibility from its academic audience (6). The value of the work for Pelias, like Poovey and Pollock, finally lies in its social use.

To explain the potential social use of performative writing, Pelias invokes H. L. Goodall, who has written that the function of writing should be “to encourage us to see and to define situations by their unique human and spiritual poetic, the interpenetrations of self, Other, and context, by our complexity and interdependence rather than by some simpler linear or causal logic” (qtd. in Pelias 7).² The human and spiritual poetic Goodall describes represents a space for understanding the “interpenetrations” of self and Other, demonstrating the value he places on criticism’s ability to generate knowledge about the value of *collaboration* and a collaborative outlook. According to Pelias, we must intellect our interconnectedness, as Goodall suggests, and the performative construction of “a story that can be used,” to use Pelias’s phrase, can help us achieve this goal much more competently than another analytical study asking you to suspend your disbelief in critical objectivity and passively ingest empirical information, likely quite divorced from social reality (Pelias 8). As Pelias argues, “Any piece of performative writing is a

² Also see Stephen Tyler, who says about post-modern ethnography that “It is not a record of experience at all; it is the means of experience” (138).

story among many but a story about issues that matter or can be made to matter to the community” (12).³

The enthusiasm of these—performative writing’s most cited—theorists begs the question: Why doesn’t every PhD candidate write a performative dissertation? The practice is becoming more common, evinced by the increasing popularity of courses on creative approaches to criticism.⁴ However, simply put, using form to convey meaning inventively can be intellectually and even emotionally arduous. Blake conveys this thrillingly with his depictions of Los, the artist, howling in pain as he labors. Performative writing involves exploring uncharted territory and getting contradictory and sometimes disheartening advice. It raises anxieties. In short, there is a great deal more to think about and a great deal of risk involved in writing a performative dissertation. It’s traumatic. Yet performative academic writing is a growing discursive genre.

Pollock addresses an argument against performative writing—that standard conventions and techniques can be taught more easily, and more easily across social boundaries (Pollock 76). Pollock dismisses this because she thinks it capitulates to a system that accepts the “lowest common denominator” as the limit of what scholars are able to produce. I argue that the desire for inclusivity evident in the argument that traditional academic conventions are easier to teach across boundaries participates in the same project as its opposite, exclusivity. True inclusivity would mean inspiring students of literary criticism to see the value and inevitability of subjectivity and how subjectivity shapes meaning.⁵

³ Adrienne Vramontes makes a similar argument in “Toward Transcendence: A Creative Process of Performative Writing,” as does Gregory Ulmer in *Teleteory*.

⁴ See Sedgwick, *Teaching Experimental Criticism*.

⁵ But inclusivity is precisely the reason Giroux advocates plain language. See Giroux’s “Language, Power, and Clarity or ‘Does Plain Prose Cheat?’”

These theorists argue that ruling performative writing as universally unviable for academic purposes would be arcane and corrupt, but Pelias does offer valuable insight about the tremendous potential for performative writing to fail. Pelias also conveys the profound weight of any failure to achieve the intended results with one's performative writing to an end that is ultimately of some use to people other than the author. Pelias warns of the peril of producing writing that is "bad": not engaging, or unable to keep the reader's interest. Writing badly is one way of producing text with no discernible social function. If it doesn't engage, how can it inform, much less inspire? Writing that repels the reader cannot be educative, and, if uneducative, it cannot participate in a liberatory project of any kind, nor can it contribute to its field of knowledge.

Common sense tells us that there are myriad other ways so-called performative writing could fail. Couldn't performative writing serve merely as a justification for any kind of self-indulgent rambling? Bad performative writing is writing that does not take its audience into account; doesn't think about its responsibility to forge connections between writer and reader and reader and world. Pelias is not without some humor: "When performative writing does not point beyond the writer, it may appear self-indulgent, narcissistic, self-serving or, to put it perhaps more kindly, therapeutic" (10). Writing recognized to be aimless, uncontrolled, self-interested, "therapeutic," or otherwise self-serving will be recognized to be valueless or even worse.

Poovey, Pollock, and Pelias and many other theorists demonstrate that performative writing as a discursive category does have consistent elements: it shows *and* tells; it displays self-awareness of the way form relates to content; it uses pleasure to increase understanding; it is abstract; its value is finally dependent on its social function. All theorists agree that performative

writing justifies itself by the value and extent to which it represents the scholar's social praxis. I agree and take John LeBret's lead, viewing performative writing as "praxis born from perceiving logocentrism as a pervasive and limiting function of scholarly production" (4).

SECTION 3. PAINFUL CONVERSIONS: WILLIAM BLAKE AND PAOLO FREIRE

William Blake (1757 – 1827) was an artist, a fabricator of illuminated poems etched into copper through an inventive and laborious process. Although there is so much visual art to distract from the textual component of his creative labor, Blake is also regarded and contextualized as a major philosophical thinker. For example, Thomas Gould’s “Four Levels of Reality in Plato, Spinoza, and Blake” carefully limns the ways Plato, Benedict di Spinoza, and Blake theorized reality as a state that could change. Gould bases his argument on the observation that in their epistemological-ontological arguments, all three major philosophers describe the possibility for humans to transcend lower-order reality into higher-order reality. Additionally, a conversion—always at-first painful—must take place in order to transcend one state of reality for another.

Plato’s four-level, hierarchical concept of reality is indeed important because it inspires us to look more deeply and critically at the world: It trains us to recognize the spurious surfaces that would stand in for reality. Plato’s formulations of reality as a series of levels and the *conversion* necessary to ascend levels of reality makes him indispensable to any study of the reality of education reform, in which what is visible on the surface tends to obstruct the view of the roles power and money play.

Blake and Spinoza divert from the verticality of Plato’s reality-paradigm and emphasize the lateral conversion from one kind of state of consciousness to another. For Gould, Spinoza differs from Plato in that “[Spinoza’s] need is not to undermine his trust in his own mind and body so that he can accept with awe and gratitude the gracious and mysterious author of true reality; the need is only to become ever more complete and precise in making order of his experiences” (36). Spinoza does not suggest we abandon reality for a higher realm, but rather

that we make sense of this “apparent jumble by taking an *ever broader* standpoint” and use this ever-broadening standpoint to make order of one’s experiences (Gould 36, my emphasis).

Creator and created come from the same substance for Spinoza, so the “good” force that causes our enlightenment is merely the universe, and every little thing (for which Blake uses the term “Minute Particular”) is part of it—every little thing has a speck of eternal goodness in it.

For Spinoza, then, God is the totality of all life—the entire universe. The philosophical incentive for transcending states of reality for Spinoza is a vision, “a synoptic understanding of all reality” (Gould 40). The incentive is practical as well as philosophical: Having such a broad vision of reality allows the philosopher to overcome life’s frustrations easily. Spinoza writes that this vision “shows us that we should await and endure fortune’s smiles or frowns with an equal mind, seeing that all things follow from the eternal decree of God by the same necessity as it follows from the essence of a triangle that the three angles are equal to two right angles” (qtd. in Gould 40). Thus, a “synoptic understanding” is the antidote to the resentment, fear, and anger that have historically led to violence. Like many eastern philosophies, Spinoza seeks to help his students broaden their vision of reality in order to find commonality among all things and, based on this consanguinity, to find tranquility. To overcome difference, as history continues to teach us, is difficult and involves radical changes in the way we think about ourselves and each other, but the benefit is a liberated society.

Spinoza’s ontology “proves” that the highest order of thinking necessitates the intellectual overcoming of difference, while Plato’s formulation is more focused on the individual who ascends these very specific levels of reality. Gould argues that the intellectual kinship between Plato, Spinoza, and Blake is not the result of direct influence: Spinoza was

directly influenced by Descartes, and Blake was largely influenced by Milton, although Blake's ontology and theories about states of reality also depart from Milton.

It is well-known that both Blake's and Milton's visions of reality stemmed from readings of the Bible. Gould clarifies the point that while Milton conceived of the Fall of humankind and redemption by Christ as "an explanation of the necessity for divinity to take on humanity," Blake emphasized "the fall of humanity from divinity and *a vision of the way to recovery*. Plato, Spinoza, and Blake all advocate for a "progressive correction of our vision of reality" that will correspond to "a progressive climb to *permanent and perfect happiness*" (41, my emphasis). By taking an extended look at the nuances of Blake's particular vision, now, we can begin to see how this is relevant to a study of American education reform.

Blake's departure from Milton involved a "vision of the way to recovery," whereas it was Milton's mission to express the "necessity for divinity."⁶ Indeed Blake does offer a vision of the way to recovery, a vision that is, I think, very helpful for a study for the state of public education in America and for the construction of a better educational system. However, the vision Blake offers in his late poetry is extremely complex. Speaking of painful conversions, reading Blake requires a commitment to spending long hours with a very demanding multimedia production that defies every tendency we have when we read the way we were taught in school.⁷ At first,

⁶ Milton saw four levels of reality. Three and Two were humans Before and After the Fall. One is below Two: Hell. Four is above Three: Heaven. Blake didn't think things were this simple because he, inspired by thinkers like Swedenborg, was drawn towards a more complex and mystical understanding of the Bible's symbology. Blake's revision of Milton is commonly thought of as a long process of mystical complication. For more on this see John Beer, *Blake's Visionary Universe* (1969).

⁷ After spending a semester helping a school district prepare for the new Common Core standards, I've seen how students are tested on their reading abilities, and it is extremely rigid. Everything in Blake's work tends toward divergent thinking. His whole life's project was to offer divergent readings of the Bible and Milton, new interpretations of texts that were considered by powerful and oppressive reading publics to already have a "correct" interpretation.

learning to press on through plate after plate of Blake's churning, exuberant, strange, unstable, inconsistent, ever-changing verse mythology is something for which "painful" is not inaccurate.

S. Foster Damon, famous Blake scholar and author of an indispensable dictionary of Blakean terms, describes Blake's style well:

Perhaps Blake's greatest contribution to literary methods occurs in [the late poetry]: his *invention* of the dream technique. It was also the cause of the greatest confusion among his earlier critics. This technique destroys the effect of a continuous and logical narrative. It permits the tangling of many threads, abrupt changes of subject, recurrent repetitions, obscure cross references, sudden intrusions, even out-and-out contradictions. Crucial scenes are omitted; others are expanded out of proportion. But this technique is closest to our deeper mental processes, and it was Blake's ideal—complete freedom of the imagination. (143, my emphasis)

Although the signifiers shift around, change, and are only occasionally reliable, one realizes that there are certain, unchanging, universal forces, or motifs, that do remain consistent in his work.

By traversing the epic, mythological landscape of Blake's late poetry, one comes to realize that Blake's unusual style has a function: To engage the reader in the construction of a reading of the world. The "vision of the way to recovery" Blake provides to his readers is an empowerment: The empowerment to transform the world with action that results from reflection on the nature of the fundamental human forces Blake has helped you know more intensely by inspiring you to create your own knowledge. The intellectual rigor of this process may explain why Gould chooses to tell us about Blake's vision of reality rather than showing it to us, as he pithily remarks of Blake's symbologies: "The divinities are symbols" (Gould 41).

Gould is right to say that Blake's desire is that through Brotherhood and the Mutual Forgiveness of Sin "true social liberty and justice would once more replace the monstrous,

Blake is about exploding the circumference of our understanding through the faculty of the imagination, from the beginning of his project and throughout, always. This still conflicts with the efforts of social policy makers, as "accountability" constricts the circumference of what is possible in textual analysis—to four choices: A, B, C, or D.

severed, and mutilated parody of it, which is the world today at Level One” (42). He is also right that the “levels” of reality in Blake are fluctuating human states more so than a sequential hierarchy. But the formula he draws up to enclose Blake’s theory is problematic. In Gould’s estimation, Level One represents the absence of anything but reason and appearances. Level Two is unbridled energy. Gould uses the kind of crude metaphor of a manic-depressive. When he’s “down,” that’s Level One. When he’s “up,” that’s Level Two. “Level Three is the synthesis of the two in a healthy, productive life. Reason and energy are no longer at war with each other for complete dominance. ... The best kind of love, both among nations and between individuals, replaces possessiveness and blind greed” (45). This configuration of Blake’s theory of reality is helpful as an introduction, but, because it is so incomplete, it is not adequately useful.

But, as I said, Gould’s synthesis of Plato, Spinoza, and Blake is expert and useful. We can find and appreciate a distillation of his expertise in his conclusion:

We come closer to what is essential to all three visions if we concentrate on their descriptions of the several conversions we must undergo. ... The various stages themselves are depicted, now as degrees of reality, now as psychological states, now as types of judgment or insight; but the transitions from one to the other must always be personal experiences, a series of difficult awakenings from a parody of what one ought to believe about himself and the world to a conception that is simultaneously less treacherous in practical judgments and more beautifully just in itself. (Gould 49)

The process of conversion is necessary to achieving a different—more just—way of thinking. Blake fits well in this contingent of conversion advocates, but Blake takes things one step further. Like Spinoza, he is interested in changing the world rather than escaping from it.

One of the most common reasons for resistance to Plato is that his system of thought is reserved for only certain people and meant, at least purportedly, to educate/create an ideal philosopher-ruler. The philosopher-ruler is a *man* who has ascended all levels of consciousness through a Platonic education. This newly enlightened *man* will want to leave society to dwell

somewhere with his beautiful thoughts, which transform his environment to one of sublime beauty. But, out of compassion and not ambition (he has transcended ambition), Plato explains, he will take one turn as ruler.

Many twentieth century critics find Plato's vision of perfect society offensive. However, the overlap in social theory between Blake and Plato is of use: The ultimate part of Plato's vision of the ascension of a thinker through the shadows and false surfaces and power structures and societal prescriptions is a type of compassionate *action*, the elaborate, interactive performance of leadership. For Blake and Plato, reflective *action* represents the epitome of the human potential for goodness. The conversion from one state to another, intellecting rather than merely sensing reality, is critically important in Blake, but everything depends on whether or not the person who has undergone that conversion, who has achieved the kind of broad vision of reality that Spinoza inspires, will overcome her fear and take that first step toward reflective action for mutual forgiveness.

Blake's Symbology

The imagined function of William Blake's art was to educate his reader in a way that would prompt action to liberate the world from the powers of reductions, condensation, selfishness that create a society in which complacent agony becomes the norm.⁸ In Blake's mythopoeia, England, and by proxy mankind, is represented by the eternal being Albion. His soul has been metaphorically made sick by human oppression and suffering, a reflection of Blake's London. Using mythological beings to represent fundamental human forces, Blake suggests that Albion is diseased in part because of society's overemphasis on reason, which he

⁸ The idea of a "minute particular" being metonymical and not synecdochal, part of a whole and not an individual microcosm, is central to Blake's social theory. The metonymic mindset encourages collaboration over competition.

represents with the eternal being, Urizen (Yr Reason). An overabundance of reason without much imagination has the effect of reducing people's perceptions of reality into mere surfaces, bringing the individual and society to the lowest level of reality, which Blake calls Ulro. Ulro is a state in which the logic of binaries and the perception of difference breed disunity and mental, physical, and social oppression. Laws written into stone by the powerful stand in for truth, and the oppressed, unable to imagine life any other way, begin to willingly participate in their own oppression.⁹ In Ulro, individuals see the oppression others individuals suffer and think it's normal and aren't surprised when they suffer the same torments. Blake's term for individual members of a larger whole is Minute Particular. Every Minute Particular has the fundamental forces mythologized by Blake within them—reason, rebellion, wrath, compassion, ambition, grace. Every Minute Particular also has a Spectre, who, like the devil on the shoulder of our popular imagination, whispers logic to stymie selfless action.¹⁰ The Spectre, also called the Selfhood, seeks to protect the Minute Particular from the pain of conversion from a low state of reality (Ulro) to a higher one (Jerusalem) and always tries to keep the Minute Particular separate from the whole of humanity. In *Jerusalem*, the Spectre we encounter is the tormentor of Los, the productive, pedagogical force, always hammering plates in the furnaces with a balance of rebellious rage and reason and creativity, channeling the energy of his Spectre in the agony of labor. The fruit of Los's labor is a visionary curriculum in the form of plates of poetry and elaborate engravings, objects meant to instill a kind of symbolic, visual literacy for talking about and developing a critical consciousness of fundamental human forces, considering how they can

⁹ This self-oppression is famously emblemized by the “mind-forg'd manacles” in Blake's poem, “London.”

¹⁰ The Spectre protects you. But out of fear and resentment. The Spectre wants others weak so you'll seem comparatively strong. Wants to never consider another's perspective in his own pleasure-seeking.

be used for social progress or social oppression. Of course, it's really Blake creating these objects that facilitate an eternal, dialogical education. The Spectre would have Los construct an educational system that teaches the memorization of "facts" within a fixed Circumference of knowledge. There would be no cultivation of imagination or generation of new knowledge through productive labor. Memorization but never transformation. Rather, Los's plates direct the student beyond the Ulroic state in which surfaces substitute for reality and creates a pedagogy that taps into and nourishes the faculty of imagination, the realm of intellection that corresponds to a better, more humane, liberated mind and society.

Los's curriculum emphasizes recognizing and controlling the Spectre and imagining and acting according to the rule of Mutual Forgiveness. Teaching students to use creativity and the imagination to gloriously explode the limits of the Circumference of what is possible, to see all the Minute Particulars of the world as parts of a single substance, to achieve a broadened perspective so that the superficial details about skin color, socioeconomic class, place of birth, are useful to facilitate conversation and understanding and conversion to higher state of reality in which we intellect our oneness rather than Ulroically letting surfaces stand in for reality. A radical education would show how collaboration and communication—and competition used for the larger goals of collaboration and communication—are the way to progress. Total, widespread, mutual forgiveness is requisite for converting the whole world from Ulro to Jerusalem, the ideal, totally liberated society, the universal fulfillment of the human potential for goodness. All the elements—imagination, education, mutual forgiveness, reason, and even the Spectre—are necessary to cure Albion's disease and convert Ulro into Jerusalem. But the most important step in this divine *becoming*, is what Blake calls apocalypse, the action that must be taken upon reflection on the creative education facilitated by Los. It is what connects theory to

practice. Apocalypse occurs when an educated, inspired Minute Particular takes action in a small or big way to liberate our society. The ultimate apocalypse would be a single action surrounded by conversation based on Blake's visionary curriculum: Everyone, all at once, realizing that because they're all connected, that compassion is in their own self-interest, and then acting on that realization.

Paolo Freire

Although no direct influence has been attributed to him, Paolo Freire takes Blake's worldview and applies it to a theory of education. Freire's Albion was Brazil, sick with oppression, ignorance, and suffering. Freire uses the term dehumanization to describe the process of Brazil's decline to a fallen state that we can recognize to resemble Blake's concept of Ulro. *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* describes Freire's experience in Brazil teaching literacy to adults. In doing so, Freire asks us to give consideration to the role of illiteracy in dehumanization. Freire's particular methodology of teaching adults to use written signifiers is conducted so that his students will attain what he terms conscientização, or critical consciousness, of their place in the larger social structure of Brazil. The difficult conversion from illiteracy to literacy is carried out so that those who have been dehumanized can reclaim their humanity through the exercise of language. The philosophy that Freire develops argues that the development of conscientização is the first step in fighting against the force of dehumanization in Brazil. With increased critical awareness, formerly illiterate people will enter into limit-situations—occasions where possible actions are limited—with the vision to accomplish what they didn't know they could. Both taking action to educate people in this way, and the exercising of conscientização to help others, are parts of humanization, the process that saves a society away from falling into Ulro.

Like Blake, Freire is highly aware of the ability of corruption to masquerade as liberation. He draws a distinction between dialogic, problem-posing education, which facilitates the improvement of critical thinking skills, creativity, communication, and collaboration and the banking system of education that covertly serves the interests of the elite, mostly by creating a complacent Ulroic population. Freire warns of the false generosity of the elite trying to liberate the oppressed. In order to truly use education to liberate the oppressed, teachers must become the oppressed, must recognize themselves as oppressed if only by virtue of playing an unconscious role in the oppression of others. Part of Freire's pedagogy, then includes the rethinking of student-teacher relations, so that instead of teachers and students, there are teacher-students and student-teachers, all engaged in a desire to learn. Truly radical education means collaborating, discussing, generating knowledge, challenging each other. Freire believes that a methodology based on these concepts will lead to a society of Permanent Liberation. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire educates his audience, presumed to be future teachers, so that in the classroom and in the world they will use praxis, or reflection-action, that humanizes.

SECTION 4. EDUCATION REFORM AS PERFORMANCE

Now you'll notice a tonal shift, reader, and I want you to know that this tonal shift is not just a matter of stylistics. There is substance in this personal shifting. Critical objectivity has flown out the window. It said it would be back later, around the time you start reading Section V. I can no longer be a disembodied voice. My name is Tom. The person who wrote what's about to come was also named Tom, but I don't think I'm him anymore. Well, I'm not and I am.

My father passed away on December 4, 2012. He had some kind of auto-immune disease that the specialists, after years of honest effort, could not diagnose. They called it Sowders Syndrome. The way it worked was like this: Dad would be fine for three months, start working out, getting healthy, looking like he was 63—not 74—and then one day he'd have flu-like symptoms. He'd get the chills and a rash all over his body. He'd go to the hospital for IV steroids. His first destination would be the ICU because his heartbeat would be so faint. He would stay in the hospital for like ten days. During his last year he had so many hospitalizations that his spirit began to erode. I should also mention that my son was born three months before Dad's passing. They met each other one time. These two events, losing a father and gaining a son, changed me, too. And if that weren't enough, my wife had her second grand mal seizure a few days after our son was born. The doctors finally diagnosed her with epilepsy, and it seemed like she was constantly on the verge of a major seizure for months. All the anxiety and hopelessness that comes with pursuing a high academic career became something I could no longer play around with. I had no more time for elbow patch dreams. I had a year-and-a-half left before I had to graduate, and I was pretty sure that the next step wouldn't be a comfy academic position with summers off. Above all else right now, I wanted financial security.

So, when I began the experience below, I was like a wounded wolf with mouths to feed. Pain has a tendency to make individuals turn inward and become self-absorbed. And responsibility for keeping one's family fed and healthy is enough to make people do the most unethical things. So how would these recent painful events, which I felt had changed me, had decisively strangled out anything childlike from the constitution of my "soul," influence the way I participated in the elaborate interactive performance of educational reform? I was consciously aware of the tradition of performative writing and sensitized to a worldview marshaled by William Blake and Paolo Freire. But I was wounded, hungry, and a little desperate.

As Rosenblatt affirms, "reader and text shape one another" (45). Bring all your experiences along with you on this journey. As Rosenblatt suggests, "in that moment of transaction, new texts and new readers [will be] born" (45).

Bob Fecho writes that "When we ask students to make meaning of a story through either reading or writing, we really are asking them to make meaning of themselves in relation to that story and ultimately to the world they live in" (109). By reading my reading of the world, you will inevitably make your own nuanced meanings. Go with it.

So let's start the only way that would make sense for a performative section on the contentious issue of education reform—with a contradiction. Fecho remarks that "Too often, as schools seek to adopt new approaches, they bring teachers into the process only once a decision for adoption has been made. In the rush to get the program up and running, teachers usually are given a session or two of professional development, a binder full of guidelines, and little else" (44). Now I'm the guy giving the professional development to teachers. I'm the guy with the binder and the power tie. No experience as a teacher in the high school classroom. In a rush to

get to a stable, rewarding career so I can provide a good life for myself and my family first. The rest of the world comes second.

January

Tuesday, January 8, 2013

9:30 a.m.

“Do you believe in God, Mr. Sowders?”

“I do. But my relationship with him is... idiosyncratic.”

“Well,” he leans in. “I believe everyone’s is.”

Of course I don’t believe in God—I’m a PhD student in English for chrissake. We don’t believe in God. But I’m trying to make a good impression, so I lie to my new employer, Dr. M. James Arceneaux, Jr., superintendent of the Broussard Parish School System. We’re in his office in Plantation. I’m seated at a conference table: He’s at a whiteboard, explaining what he wants me to do in the district over the course of the next semester. I take out a notebook.

“Don’t write anything down,” he says abruptly. “Just listen.”

He has disheveled gray hair and a silk tie. He gives quick and hard-to-parse introductions to the concepts of blended learning, school choice, and Common Core and says that so-and-so this and that will introduce me to concepts and take me around the district.

When I leave the cinderblock building and pull out of the small parking lot in my old silver VW with the windshield all cracked to hell, I have the first good feeling I’ve had in weeks. I feel like I’ve been treated like a *professional*. I feel like good things are going to happen for me and my family. It’s a welcome feeling.

My Spectre, chained to a rock, stops his blubbering, opens his eyes, and cracks a smile. I can see it reflected in the cracks of my windshield.

Monday, January 14, 2013

6:23 a.m.

Today is my first day of working as a doctoral student extern in Broussard Parish. Real quick: This alternative source of funding—and the fact that no one had expressed interest in working in a public school district (T.A.s in English at LSU get to teach only one course per semester, which is pretty cushy) allowed me to regain entrance into the PhD program at LSU, which is a big deal not just because I need to finish this degree (!) but because I can't stop thinking about my dad saying, when he saw Leo the one time, "Now I only have one thing left I need to see before I die: you get your PhD." I think about that many times a day. Still cannot believe he's gone and can't think about it without getting teary. Anyway, I'm back in the program at LSU, as you know, and this is my first day working in a public school. Never saw this coming, but ... here we go!

8:43 p.m.

This morning, my eyes opened in the dark bedroom full of boxes. I shaved for the first time in years. I put on a tie. I drove over the Mississippi River in the crepuscular light, and as the sun rose I drove past chemical plants and sugar cane fields, thirty minutes along the west bank of the river to what looked like a brand new, state-of-the-art high school. It was the Math, Science, and Arts Academy-West, a new magnet school.

And now I'm sitting in a chair feeling cold, talking with Sandra Boyer, director of the upper school. It is the first time I've been in a functioning high school since I was, myself, a high school student at East Chapel Hill High in 1999. There's an annoying cooked food smell.

Ms. Boyer takes me around to meet teachers: I meet teachers, mostly a few years younger than me. I meet a bubbly "master teacher" who talks to me in front of a chemistry lab. A skinny

kid stops in his tracks on his way into the lab and stares at me. The bubbly master teacher asks him, “You want to know who this is?”

The kid looks at me. “Who are you?”

“I’m Tom Sowders, who are you?”

“Ivan.” He walks into the classroom.

So far so good, I guess?

Last night I was reading about Geoffrey Canada and his charter school, The Promise Academy. The large plastic signs I see on the walls, with positive slogans, remind me of the signs Canada had posted all over his schools in Harlem. I feel like there’s a common movement happening across the country to help kids perform better in school. I also feel like there’s a common slipping, a grasping at quicksand, a lashing. Something is rotten to the core.¹¹

Back in her cold office, Ms. Boyer and I talk for a while about the benefits of blended learning, although the concept is still quite new to both of us. We’re exploring the topic together, in dialogue. We know that blended learning is supposed to create more class time for discussion and open ended projects. We know that blended learning is supposed to allow students to achieve mastery of each unit before moving on in the course. It seems to solve a lot of problems associated with the district’s low ranking in the state. Credit recovery is possible and so is accelerated credit accrual. Ms. Boyer and I also agree on the importance of classroom discussion and the shame of the overemphasis on standardized tests. Ms. Boyer tells me that I will be devoting some of my energy to giving students training in ACT preparation. I’m ready to do anything that will possibly help me gain employment after I graduate.

¹¹ Months later, after compiling this elaborate performance into what is now its shape, I’m certain that this problem at the core of education has everything to do with the way that American society generally regards teachers—not as professionals.

She took me to what's called the "Data Room," a locked room where three walls are covered with solid-colored nylon sheets with clear plastic pockets holding index cards. On each card is a student's name, standardized test scores, and a colored sticker indicating whether the student's test scores are Basic, Proficient, or Advanced. These scores are used to calculate overall score for schools in the district. The test scores at MSA-West, because it is technically a magnet program and not a school, go to the students' "zone schools." So, many of these blue dots, which correspond to Advanced scores on end of year tests, represent scores that comprise the overall score of Plantation High. Some represent Wake Field High. Etc. From a cabinet, she gives me a thick ACT preparation guide to help me with my training course design (and so that I could take a practice ACT test at home).

I get in my car and drive the few miles down the road to Plantation High School to meet with the principal, Mr. Matthew Parry. Mr. Parry explains that he is running a "D" school, and that he wants to bring it up to a "C" school. Therefore, his hopes for me are more focused on ACT training than blended learning. As we walk to PHS's "data room," a similar room with nylon sheets and color-coded index cards, he asks if I could create an online ACT training course that focuses on Reading Comprehension in a timed environment. Timed reading comprehension is the weakest testing area for the school and a big reason the school hasn't been able to ascend from "D" status.

We go back to his large office near the front door of the school. Mr. Parry explains to me the way students are tiered in relation to what he perceives to be their ACT test preparation needs. "Some of [the Tier 3 students] are lucky if they can tie their shoes in the morning," he says. Silence. "That was meant to be a joke."

I express that I understood that, like in a corporation, there is a bottom line, and that the bottom line in this case is student scores on standardized tests. I say, “That’s the system and we have to work within it. I get that.” But I express that it’s too bad that the kids that need our help the most—the Tier 3 kids—get overlooked in the attempt to bring the school’s score up.

He agrees that it’s unfortunate but simply says that the Tier 3 students “can’t help us.” There seems to be a fundamental inversion of what I thought the central function of education was—to help youth learn. To help *them*. What kind of perverse system is this, in which we need students to help us? Help *us* get a certain grade? This reminds me of nothing I experienced as a public high school student in the late 1990s.

The young principal remarks several times how much “fun” teaching used to be for him, especially the Digital Media class he taught, in which students did everything from broadcasting to creating a green room. He seems like he really enjoyed teaching, and I’m thinking that perhaps that’s what he’d rather be doing. He’s young and has a babyface and he’s burdened with a little extra around the middle. I don’t mean to be rude: But his job seems to have a direct effect on his body, and I think it’s an important detail to include. The guy is stressed out. Probably a hair away from diabetic. It’s a deleterious situation embodied.

At the same time, the test scores are the bottom line, and if I’m to have any success in the field of educational consultation, and it seems like educational consulting will be a possible career for me after all this, I’ll probably have to have proven results. Like, to say that the schools test scores rose by x points. Right?

Digression: Blake's Symbology

"Albion"

Blake was born and raised among citizens who were outraged at the crown's abuse of power. Political life was particularly turbulent in London during the years of the American Revolution, in the wake of the Gordon Riots and the Boston Massacre (Erdman 8-11). In his youth, Blake was an apprentice at a print shop that likely printed many pro-American, anti-war pamphlets (Erdman 6). There was a cultural trend among pro-American British artists and writers to represent "America as the land of liberty and virtue, England as that of corruption and slavery, and King George as a cruel and obstinate tyrant" (Erdman 6).¹² Even Blake's parents resented the king's repression of the spirit of independence, admiring the Colonies' pursuit of liberty. So in Blake's milieu, as in ours, there was the profound, difficult-to-surmount presence of corruption and power, and people in Blake's neighborhood shared a strong resentment toward the Crown.

Eventually, an apparent current of revolution running through the world was recognized and cited to be connected to the successful revolutions in France and the American colonies. This provoked many critics and artists to inquire into the nature of revolution and to look for some underlying force responsible for these revolutions. It seemed to Blake that western civilization was on the brink of a total radical transformation. He spent the last decades of his life

¹² From the ages of ten to twenty-two, Blake's area of London "was the central rallying-ground, outside the American colonies, of resistance to the court" (Erdman 13). Blake's neighbors and presumably his parents (see p 13) objected to King George III's "apparent ambition to crush the spirit of independence wherever it might appear" (13). "Two revolutions had taught kings of England to respect the people, and George III did not attempt to ignore their Parliamentary representatives. He simply bought them" (13). Thus, Blake grew up in an environment of anger toward arbitrary power, toward corruption and the use of money to turn people into cowards and slaves. "Taking over the Whig machinery of bribery and electoral manipulation, [George III] effectually disintegrated the Whigs and surrounded himself with 'friends'" (13).

constructing a theory of human nature, society, and the path to revolution: personal, social, and spiritual. Reading his work and gazing on his plates two hundred years later, his poetry seems to want to instruct by inviting the reader to create knowledge about herself and her world.

In the long poem *Jerusalem*, Albion is a symbol for society, which is always in the process of becoming either an oppressed or liberated state. Los, the poem's protagonist, is determined to save Albion from "Death" by combating the "Satanic" forces that seek to bind Albion into unimaginative, programmatic reality, in which everyone is oppressed and pretty much OK with it. The symbolic "death" of Albion would result from the "death" of the imagination, which, in turn, results from the widespread repression of imaginative thoughts and desires. Blake's argument is that such repression is done for the sake of enslaving the population both mentally and socially. And this is imminent as *Jerusalem* begins; Albion is "ready to fall into Non-Entity" (249). Emanations are "opaque"; "And Albion is himself shrunk to a narrow rock in the midst of the sea!" (314). There is a current, urgent crisis of condensation.¹³

Demonstrating his sickness, Albion declares that it is "A foundation and certainty and demonstrative truth:/ That Man be separate from Man" (Blake 243). Institutional "truth[s]" are typically an oppression, an impediment to education and limitation to our ability to understand one another precisely because imagination, the force that challenges the rigidity of "truths," is what allows us to conceptualize our commonality—that we all come from a singular origin and that we are all composed of the same substance. Reducing the complexity of life—the awareness of life's heterogeneity that comes from consciousness of the way all wholes are composed of minute particulars—into rigid "certainties," allows something like the axiom "Man be separate from Man" to masquerade as truth while eclipsing all possibility for complicating this isolation-

¹³ Does this sound familiar? Cough cough NOCHILDLEFTBEHIND cough cough.

promoting statement. If new knowledge is supposed to begin with the “foundation” that we are all different, separate, not connected parts of one whole, then the “truths” that will emerge from this “foundation” will privilege competition and not collaboration, silence and not communication, suspicion, jealousy, resentment, envy. Albion’s voice here is the mindless repetition of the mentally enslaved. Albion is “shrunk to a narrow rock.” The human imagination has been epidemically repressed—leaving opaque hardnances, certainties, and the faculty of reason without rebellion or creativity. The world is fixed and cannot be transformed but only adapted to. Albion’s remark about the “Certainty” of separation defines human nature as isolation and inflicts this definition. What’s missing here is a radical education that will complicate Albion’s false axiom that “Man be separate from Man.” To create the kind of education that man is *connected* to man, in order to save Albion’s sick soul: This is Los’s (and Blake’s) mission.

Tuesday, January 15, 2013

8:37 a.m.

I arrive at MSA West and somehow remember how to find Ms. Boyer’s office. She tells me “I don’t want you to think we’re spying on you,” but Mr. Parry (Plantation High Principal) and she last night discussed their desire for me to create an ACT preparation course online, using Blackboard. She says she has already started a Blackboard course online for me to use and that after I’ve finished it, it would be something I could take with me and use in the future.

The reason they’re so intent on me helping raise ACT scores is that Senior ACT scores account for 25% of the school’s ranking. The other 3 quarters are made up of COHORT (students making adequate test scores and amassing the right amount of credits to move onto the next grade—students don’t get held back), EOC tests (different grades typically take different

tests: biology and Algebra in 9th grade, English II and ... in tenth grade), and something like graduation index. I'm obviously still a little unclear on this, but I need to master it soon, since my job here is to help raise the district's ranking.

Now, I'm sitting in Ms. Davis's Algebra 1 class, and she's explaining Linear Equations, using a smartboard (or is that a Promethean?). She's asking if certain equations are Linear or not? She asks the students, and when an equation is linear she circles it in blue, and when it's not she puts an orange X next to it.

During the first five minutes of every class, students work on a P.O.D. (Problem of the Day) posted on Blackboard.

“OK, now that we have talked about how to identify linear equations, we will start *graphing* them. Y equals four x minus one. The x-values are negative two, zero, and two.”

One student, a white kid with a Justin Beiber haircut says “got it!” almost immediately. A white girl on the other side doesn't get it. Justin Beiber starts yammering with friends, saying “This is all we did yesterday!” while Ms. Davis helps the girl. Clearly these students are on different levels. But Ms. Davis handles this well and the class keeps moving at a good pace. Beiber explains how he figured out the y-values so quickly to the rest of the class at Ms. Davis's request.

Ms. Davis continues to instruct from the smartboard. As I look up—a white kid says “This is easy,” but a black kid in a hoodie looks out the window, has an ear bud in one ear, now seems to be working some kind of homework for some other class. The kid needs individual attention?

During a section called “Why Fractions Are Not Scary” the conversations between students grow in vigor and volume, and I’m watching to see when Ms. Davis will intervene. Finally, “Stop talking please.”

Beiber offers a quick but not insincere “Sorry.” The situation improves. Things are more focused, and learning can resume.

Now they’re back to plotting points, something one student complains they did this “All Fall.”

“You had us doing that other thing and now you want us back on that?”

“You’re going to be doing both tonight so don’t worry about it,” says Ms. Davis.

5:43 p.m.

In a flipped classroom, Ms. Davis’s lecture on linear functionality would be online. The students would be expected to watch the instruction video before next class period. Then, in class, students would be given problem sets to work through based on where they were in the course. In the case that help is needed, Ms. Davis would intervene, reinforcing her recorded lesson with minilessons for individuals or small groups. Students would be moving at their own pace through the instruction and problem sets and onto larger projects. Ms. Davis would be walking around helping students with problem sets and larger projects. Any Justin Beiber who moved with more celerity through the course, would be available to help students who needed help understanding and applying concepts.

Ms. Davis is the go-to faculty member for help with technology, from the software included on the MacBooks given to the district to Blackboard, she is the master. She knows very well how to record her lessons using the MacBook and Promethean smartboard. But there are too problems. 1) She doesn’t have time at home to record videos all week. And 2) She can’t record

them live because her students talk too much. These issues prevent her from even trying the flipped classroom technique, although she expresses interest in making videos for students to watch as review and even as introductions to units.

“But where’s the time to create them?”

Digression: The Story of School Reform

As long as there has been public education in the United States, there have been school reformers pushing for change. Much of the debate about publically funded schools has centered around financial concerns or concerns about the *purpose* of public school. Financial matters have always been at the center of education reform, from northern interests in child labor in the 19th century to current debates about school reform and the global economy. One has to repeatedly ask—what’s in it for each side of this argument? Who benefits if we teach our children to be astute critical thinkers, and who assumes risk in that situation? Who benefits if the goals of public education shift from fundamental human development to proficiency on standardized tests?

During the long debate about common schools that took place during the 1840s, when compulsory taxation to fund local schools was first proposed, there was a major contingent of people opposed to taxation for public, or common schools. This argument proposed that “School taxation...was not only illegal, antidemocratic, and un-American; it was also an affront to the most basic right of parents: the right to raise their children as they saw fit” (Nasaw 53). Opponents felt that school taxes were “an attack on the sanctity of the private property system,” at odds with the intentions of the founding fathers. Property taxes for roads or prisons, things that everyone used or that protected everyone, were understandable and acceptable. But not everyone

had school-aged children, and, if they did, they might choose to teach their children at home, as was still very common, or to send them to a church school (Nasaw 53).

Parents and community members in the mid 19th century were accustomed to education, of course, but the tradition had been for local communities to educate their kids in small group settings, home settings, or religious settings. The purpose of educating children was largely to help children learn who they were, culturally speaking, and where their traditions had come from. The proposition of a centralized, unified, property-tax-supported common schooling system was unacceptable to supporters of local community-directed schooling because each community's language, customs, and religion were so importantly woven into educational goals. To have outsiders dictate curricula would mean erasing these cultural ingredients from schooling and therefore from the communities themselves (Nasaw 54).¹⁴ While free school opponents were outraged at the notion that the state would dictate curricula that ignored what they held as sacred components of education, they were not necessarily opposed to the availability of tuition-free education (Nasaw 57).

A prime example of this tension between common school reformers and community members in the mid 19th century emerges from the cultural clash between “Americans” born in the US and Irish immigrants. Common school reformers represented by Horace Mann made efforts all over the country to attract the children of Irish immigrants to their free schools. Creating a strong, unified country required purging the children of the Irish of their strongly Catholic heritages and equipping them to join mainstream American (Protestant) society and to escape the poverty in which they seemed to be entrenched. The disciplinary training provided by

¹⁴ See James Pyle Wickersham, *A History of Education in Pennsylvania*. (Lancaster, Penn.: Inquirer Publishing Co., 1886), pp. 319-20.

the common school classroom was the best solution (Nasaw 73). The purpose of the common school, therefore, was to instill “American” ideals and notions of manners and morality—the kind that would prepare the future generation to pull themselves out of poverty and into the skilled workforce.

In New York, the Public School Society, which was made up of wealthy people, in an attempt to force the hand of Irish immigrants who were reluctant to allow the state to take control of their children’s’ educations, recommended to the Common Council that public charity should be denied to parents who did not send their children to common schools. This is just one example of the way that the political influence that comes with financial wealth has the potential to exact control over citizens. A few dollars from one hand to another can mean thousands of parents losing control over what, how, and why their children learn: It can mean the dismantling of cultural heritage. This becomes a theme as one looks at the history of school reform.

Friday, January 18, 2013

I took the English portion of a Princeton Review practice ACT today and scored 71/75 with 9 minutes left. I’m happy with this score, but I need to go over all the questions and nuance the PR’s lessons on how to prepare for the questions. In my own lessons, for example, I know I need to go over who/whom, and talk about the importance of being concise.

Tuesday, January 22, 2013

6:26 a.m.

I’m nervous about meeting with Mr. Stephenson. I detect from him (and Colleen Weathers, the much-praised English teacher) a certain skepticism and resistance. They see my shiny tie, I think, and say *who the hell is this guy? I don’t want this guy in my classroom. He’s not a teacher. He’s a tourist. He’s corrupt. Look at that tie and that hair. Probably Republican.*

Fortunate son. This is resistance and how it feels. Kind of glad to see it, although I wish I could kind of whisper to them *hey guys this is only a costume.*

12:53 p.m.

Arceneaux brought us into Chief Academic Officer Elvis Cavalier's office and asked me about William Blake and Geoffrey Canada, asked me what I thought they had to do with one another. I told him that for Blake an apocalypse is not the end times but a lived experience of total change.

He said, "so you think Canada did what Blake said."

I was like, Yes. Canada was inspired and *acted* on that inspiration.

(I need to ask Canada, should I get the chance, WHAT inspired him. Was it something he read? Just an original idea with no inspiration from another person's written work? Perhaps not written work.)

I told Arceneaux and Elvis Cavalier that in order to radically change a school district, one must not think of reasons not to make fundamental changes but *must make* fundamental changes. (I need to prepare a presentation on why year-round schooling works.) I had their full attention. I am full of mission. Dr. Arceneaux said that he was going to send me to the Harlem Children's Zone in New York to "breathe in" the atmosphere of change.

Everyone was all like, "and if he says it, he will, too." Los howled and the Spectre grinned.

This morning at 7:30 a.m. I met with Kristine Davis to get a brief tutorial in using SMARTNotebook (Mac Program) to create video lessons. Tomorrow morning I'll be able to pick up my NEW MACBOOK PRO (yeahhhh!), which will have the software already installed. Then, the plan is, I'll get a schedule for empty classrooms at MSA West, and I'll use different

classrooms on different days to use the Promethean Boards to create sample instructional videos.

Boom!

Wednesday, January 23, 2013

11:30 a.m.

I spend an hour at a square table in the middle of the MSA-West “war room” (a.k.a. the “data room” a.k.a. the room to which I’ve been given a key, a.k.a. the room where I’m “stationed”), outlining a first ACT prep lesson taken almost directly from a popular ACT test prep guide.

I drive back to Plantation High and find Mr. Peters’s social studies room. Welcome to American History. As last period’s class files out of the room, Peters explains that the class isn’t very rigorous because “schools here aren’t tiered.” He corrects himself, “Junior highs are tiered, but this school isn’t. Clearly, I have some Tier One and Tier Two students and probably some Tier Three.”

I explain that blended learning can be implemented in varying degrees and forms to make it easier to do a good job creating deep learning experiences for individual students who need it more than the more advanced students, all in the same class. So Tier 1 students can work at their own pace and can even help students in lower tiers. I say that he’s already using a blended format with his extensive PowerPoint presentations that he posts online. The only difference would be recording an audio track (and perhaps including a visual of him speaking) and to make a video file from his power points. It would be very easy to do.

The new class has all taken their seats. Mr. Peters has told his students to ignore me, that I’m here observing. I become mesmerized by a boisterous activity involving the incentive of “green bucks,” school currency good for PHS hoodies, laptop covers, school supplies. It’s

Wednesday; there's a test Friday. This is a review activity, opening up questions to the class based on a PowerPoint he is currently working through.

Greenbucks give students crazy incentive to raise hands and answer questions. Lots of hands up and correct answers.

This review with greenbucks is going AMAZINGLY! Where did students learn this information? At home or previously in class?

This causes me to reflect on the concept of blended learning. If these greenbuck-snatching students were forced to complete these worksheets at home, I don't think the information would soak in in such an energetic environment. This review makes it seem to me that the majority of the class will do well on the test. The only drawback to this approach that I can see is that it takes some students (Tier 3) longer to write down the answers than the Tier 1 students. Waiting for Tier 3 students to write in the correct answers causes the energy to falter. The Tier 1 students get bored.

Focused question: Since Peters implies that it's a difficulty to teach multiple tiers in the same classroom space, how can Blended Learning alleviate that difficulty while still maintaining the dynamic, incentive-strengthened classroom learning environment with which he is so successful?

One student asks if she can go on to answer the rest of the questions on the worksheet. "No," Peters says casually. "We'll answer them together."

One student anticipates an answer, and Peters jokes, "Martin, you sneaking into my computer and looking at the answers?"

I go back to the war room and write this.

Thursday, January 24, 2013

This morning I drive along the levee down River Road way out to East Broussard High School to meet with a master teacher, who, I've been told, is masterful when it comes to teaching ACT preparation. I'm here for guidance. And possibly practice tests.

The woman in the front office escorts me to a room used for TAP, where, as I turned in, I was almost startled by a woman approaching me with a gleaming smile and high energy. As she shook my hand, she rocked forward and up a little on one foot. I became quickly engaged in a conversation with her, and as we sat down at the foldout table, it became clear that she is an educator who knows what she is talking about. She lets me know she has won some pretty major awards, like the MILKEN and Disney Teacher of the Year awards. She's also in the later stages of a Ph.D. in Education.

First we talked about the Reading Comprehension section of the ACT. She showed me how she teaches students to comprehend what they are reading. The key to this is having students "make pictures in their minds" while reading, underlining and circling words that they can easily picture in their imaginations. Engaging the imagination, she says, of course, helps to engage the reader with the text. The result is that the subject matter is better understood at the end of the timed period. Engaging the faculty of the imagination is core to Blake's social theory, and personally very important to me. She suggested the I do/We do/You do approach to getting students to practice and test taking techniques aligned with what I was learning in the ACT guides. She copied a bunch of ACT practice tests from a book she had. Score, score, and score.

A passionate educator, Ms. Mayeaux also offered advice about my dissertation, the thing that you are presumably reading, if this makes the cut. Her big contribution to my investigation of what has been keeping Broussard Parish so lowly ranked for so long is a suggestion to look at

the principals and many of the teachers. She told me stories about principals having nasty behavior and teachers making very young children self-conceptualize as “bad.”

I think I just decided that I want to start a charter elementary school in Broussard Parish.

Digression: Blake’s Symbology

“Ulro”

Reason without imagination puts Albion in the state of becoming Ulro, the state in which people accept and adapt to a programmatic reality. People, only knowing what they can sense, only understanding reality in terms of what’s already known, operate in a state devoid of compassion. Self-concern divides people, and the diabolical few who have a critical consciousness of the state of oppression can use people’s self-concern to push forward agendas meant to further oppress the many and further reward the few. In a severe Ulroic state, books are burned, slogans stand in for reality, people are educated first to think in binary terms of good and evil, right and wrong, and are then taught what’s good and what’s bad at the discretion of those whom oppression privileges. The imagination atrophies.

Friday, January 25, 2013

Today I spent some time at MSA West figuring out how to get my computer to recognize the Logitech headset (Kristine Davis showed me). Then I spent some time getting the ActivSlate to work, which involved two calls to the Promethean tech support team. Without TOO much struggle, I got things working and am now fully equipped to create online video lessons from home. Now I just need to figure out how to make effective video lessons. I won’t be too hard on

myself if they're awkward at first. This will take some time to perfect, but perfecting this could shape my future.¹⁵

I also had some help from a Ms. Edwards (6th grade), who helped me with some advanced settings on the copy machine. I made many, many copies of ACT Reading test prep exercises to give kids as homework. When I got home I spent 15 minutes stapling these copies into packets. Anyone ever heard of pdfs? Why am I doing it like this?

Then I met with Steven Bickmore at LSU—a potential dissertation committee member. He gave me some cautionary advice. “Write down in your journal that Bickmore gave you some advice.” He seemed to engage more with the fact that I’ll be designing a proposal for the facility at North Broussard than in my Blended Learning endeavor. Perhaps that is because the Blended Learning endeavor is muzzy. “Students might not have internet at home. Solve that. Students might not have printers. Oh well for getting them to print out worksheets.” According to Bickmore, studies show that students do not do well encountering new material at home without a “knowing other.” Um, mmkay. This is not what I want to be hearing. He seems casually certain that blended learning and flipped classrooms won’t work.

He thinks that “school board officials should just admit it: We lost.” He thinks focus should be placed entirely on the young ones, first graders, etc. I think about how Geoffrey Canada responded to this question about giving up on older kids and focusing our efforts on pre-K and K kids. Canada remarked that he wouldn’t give up on the older kids, but, then again, he did sort of kick a whole grade of older students out of his Promise Academy because their performance on tests was not improving despite all Canada’s and his staff’s efforts.

¹⁵ Could shape my future. Could shape our future. Could shape my future. Could shape her future. Could shape his future. Could shape our future. Could shape my future. Could shape my future. Could shape my future. Could shape my future. Could shape our future.

I think to myself that test taking strategies should be *drilled* into high schoolers, but, other than that, perhaps, yes, fundamental improvements in education should be focused on the younger students. That's where there are the best chances of success.

Digression: Future Praxis

I have a strong desire to coordinate the new community center I'll be designing and to eventually open a new charter school in Broussard Parish. I want to model this community center and charter school directly on Canada's Harlem Children's Zone and Promise Academy. I want to start by facilitating the education of expecting parents, exactly like Canada did with his Baby College. After Baby College for the parents, there are more free classes for parents on early childhood development and parenting. When the babies become toddlers, they will enter a program not unlike Canada's Harlem Gems—we'll simply call it the Broussard Gems—where kids will learn social skills and get important early enrichment, paving the way for early literacy. Proficiency on assessments will naturally follow (all the way to college). The toddlers will then enter Pre-Kindergarten at a charter school like the Promise Academy that will eventually go through 6th or through 8th grade, but will at first just teach pre-K through First or Second Grade.¹⁶

I have been reading Deborah Meier's book, *The Power of Their Ideas*. She is a strong advocate of *public* schools, and her argument mostly lies in a belief that to strive for a strong and good democracy we must invest our faith and resources into our *public* school system. She believes in small schools, teacher-governance, and has had a lot of success.¹⁷ As I read, I'm wondering, are charter schools public or private?

¹⁶ These ideas are based on Geoffery Canada's Promise Academy.

¹⁷ See Meier, *The Power of Their Ideas*.

Monday, January 28, 2013

So it's probably time to give a detailed journal entry about Deborah Meier's *The Power of Their Ideas*, but I haven't been able to do that yet. I'll get that done during the next couple days. I've also already started *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* by Diane Ravitch. I'm using these to create a context for my experience in Broussard (and to inform my desire to start a charter school).

But now I have other tasks to focus on. In thirty minutes (it's 5:55 a.m.), I'll head to MSA, make some copies, try to get Kristine Davis to explain to me how to create a Blackboard Community (and what info I need to get from students to add them to this new community), and then I'll be doing ACT training for the Reading Test all day.¹⁸ Me. Teaching high school. All day. Diving in?

I remember my first day of teaching at UNC-W when I was 26—same nerves, same tie clip. In fact, I wonder if the tie is too much, too old school, too I'm-the-authority. Maybe the kids will not like that. Maybe a tie and personality are worse than a relaxed outfit and serious demeanor. Maybe kids won't pay attention. Maybe they'll just straight up make fun of me. I have Ms. Boyer's cell number: If there's a kid I can't handle, or who is impeding the progress for those who want to be there, I'll just text or call her. Better make sure she's prepared to receive such a call for help.

9:39 a.m.

Just finished two sections of ACT Reading Test Training Day #1: Prose Fiction.

The first one was a little dicey because half the students came in late. There was confusion because they were supposed to get their ACT Training schedules last Friday, but that

¹⁸ This year, the ACT will account for 25% of each high school's score.

didn't happen apparently. Then, students were confused as to whether or not ACT classes started this week or next, and, despite all this, the first section was successful insofar as I kept their attention pretty well.

During the second hour, I had much more success. There were only four students, and I have immediately taken interest in a kid named Terrance, who spoke with me afterwards. He asked me what I made on end of year tests when I was younger. He understood that it's kind of corrupt that the people who write the ACT make a test that has the power to determine so much about one's future, while it doesn't even really test the curriculum the students have been studying. Instead it's like a weird test of test-taking strategies themselves. But, we dismissively agreed, that this is just the system in which we work. I told him that if I could change the test and the power it has to effect a student's life, I would, of course. But we have to play the game in order to make it in life. In order to get the better of those seeking to hold us back, we have to acquire some control over our fate, and one way of acquiring some control, some power, is learning what the test is *really* testing. Learning how the questions try to trick. How they try to suck you in and devour your precious minutes.

"Don't let questions suck you in," I tell the four of them. "Use the Process of Elimination and Personal Order of Difficulty techniques and mark questions as Now, Later, or Never. That'll give you some control over the test. The test, which tries to control you."

The four students in my second hour were very intelligent. After the hour, as they packed up to leave, I asked them, Do you like going to his school? They said Yes. "It's like the best school in the district, right?" They said yes. "What's the worst?"

Terrance laughed, and so did another. After a couple seconds of silence, Terrance said, "Wake Field."

Wake Field looms over this whole experience, and I have to admit, knowing that I'm creating an online cache of instructional ACT training videos that could be viewed from afar gives me some kind of comfort. I'm nervous about standing in front of those Wake Field students. Nervous about trying to help students who have been treated like shit for so many years. Nervous about encountering the problems that progressive, nurturing early education programs try to prevent. Seeing how unfixable it is. But I am also optimistic and excited to see what I'm made of. And to make some kind of tiny difference. To raise a couple test scores by a couple points. Maybe even one student might do well enough to get into college when they otherwise would not. It's an incredible chance and privilege I've been given.¹⁹

Digression: The Story of School Reform

Common school reformers initially failed in their effort to legally force Irish children into common schools because compulsory attendance in common schools would necessitate government subsidies to families that relied on their children's wages to avoid starvation. Manufacturers certainly did not want to foot this bill, as child labor was highly profitable. To even ask for the support of manufacturers in the form of taxes to help Irish families would mean sacrificing manufacturers as supporters of the common school cause (Nasaw 73).

But in 1852, the Boston School Committee's desire to make school compulsory for all children (to mitigate the problem of Irish children roaming the streets all day and the threat to property that represented) was fulfilled. Children in the streets instead of school or factory could now be arrested and incarcerated in high security reform schools (Nasaw 76). Responsibility for educating children officially went from parents to the state, and this enraged the Irish, who saw this legislation as "destruction of the family" (Nasaw 78).

¹⁹ Nervous excitement makes me a human, but it does not make me a qualified ACT instructor, faculty trainer, or educational consultant. Just sayin.

For common school reformers in the North, then, the purpose of schooling was three-fold: It was meant to prepare children to enter the skilled workforce, something good for the prosperity of the nation; It was meant to socialize children uniformly, to instill the American identity, which was closely tied to the industries that made the U.S. a juggernaut in the world economy; Thirdly, it served the purpose of keeping poor children out of the streets and incapable of committing crimes that threatened the private property of the wealthy.²⁰ Nasaw writes:

The schools of the nation had always been agencies of socialization as much as of education: they had taught morals and religion, disciplined and trained character as enthusiastically as they had offered instruction in reading and writing. But never before had common schooling been represented so explicitly as the most efficient and effective form of protection against what Mann referred to as ‘the giant vices which now invade and torment’ our society.... Once the common schools had been defined as institutions of social control, as agencies through which the prosperous and propertied would socialize the poor and working people, it mattered not what color, ethnicity, religion, or geographical area the latter came from. Once political control had been established, the form and content of schooling could be adjusted to the specific characteristics of the lower-class population. (81-82)

What is needed here is the voice of opposition to this system of homogenization, of control, of the wealthy molding the future generation in the manner that benefits the wealthy and ignores the humanity of the poor. Without that voice, one has no answer to the question: What is the alternative to this kind of educational system? Is our current educational system the result of “adjust[ments] made by wealthy people with ‘political control?’” Is it too late to imagine another kind of school system, with better or more democratic goals? What should the goals of public education be, then, if not to prepare the masses to enter the workforce?

Tuesday, January 29, 2013

I find myself very resistant to Diane Ravitch’s book, and, I have to admit, this has to do with my prior knowledge of her opposition to Geoffrey Canada and the charter school

²⁰ Obviously, in the South, slavery prevented universal common school enrollment.

movement. What I've found is that she overlaps with Meier in her conviction that the public school system itself needs help. That standardized testing is killing the system. And this of course I agree with—I can see it everywhere in Broussard Parish, from the stress thinly veiled by Principal Parry's melancholy humor to the meticulousness of the scoring charts in the “data rooms” at MSA and PHS. Still, I cannot see why someone would work so hard to say something negative about programs that have improved the lives of hundreds of kids: Canada's work, the work of Kipp, the work of all these charter schools, has been of immediate and real help to communities that want to see more of their kids go to college. Yes, standardized testing, the way it exists now, sucks. And yes, charter schools might encourage families to run away from the public school system. But you can't blame people for wanting immediate solutions! Who is willing to let their child enter a broken school for the sake of the larger picture? The public school system simply has to change or die. If this means more charter schools, so be it. Hopefully, school leaders in the more traditional public realm will take the methodology of a school like Canada's Promise Academy as an example.

I agree that schools should be held accountable. I agree that competition will foster improvement. Now, I think Ravitch would reduce me to a corporate-minded supporter of privatization, etc. I started with the assumption that Ravitch's vehement criticism of the charter movement could be dangerous to the welfare of children, and I maintain that. But what *really* irks me is her rhetoric. She is so reductive of her opposition, using phrases like “non-educators.” How, I wonder, does she define a non-educator? Am I a non-educator? I've taught college English for five years—composition, literature, American poetry. Her rhetoric is manipulative, and that discredits her for me. I think she's a careerist, who, because she has been offered some pretty big time roles during her very public career, has been granted way more credibility than

she deserves. She started out as a proponent of testing. She even supported No Child Left Behind! But now she's had this great big turn-around. Our hero, our angel. I just see her as shady and self-important. I'm fifty pages into her best-selling book, and I haven't encountered a single child's voice.

Not so with Deborah Meier. Meier is an innovator who believes in choice. Her commitment to neighborhood public schools, her unwillingness to desert the public school system, is admirable and inspiring. Apparently these two thinkers share a blog. I haven't checked it out yet. I don't know how they've agreed and disagreed. But I like Meier's style much better, and style says a lot. My academic training has made me pretty good at identifying discursive conventions. Ravitch likes to drop in her two-dollar words. She must think they give her credibility.

Meier is more accessible and her style is more democratic. However, I perceive an urgency in Broussard Parish, and I think a charter school would stimulate the whole district sooner rather than later.

Wednesday, January 30, 2013: Suspension of Disbelief

At 7:20 a.m. I called Dr. Arceneaux. He answered, "Good Morning, Dr. Sowders." (He always calls me Dr. Sowders even though he knows perfectly well that I haven't finished my PhD yet.) He said he and Melanie would call me back in a few minutes with an offer to do some proposal writing and presentations for "schools of choice" in the district. They called back. He offered me fifteen thousand dollars. Whoa. Insert celebratory expletives.

He said my duty will be to write the proposal for the virtual magnet school they want to pilot starting in August and a humanities program consisting of a blended curriculum centered around the theme of the Atchafalaya Swamp. Producing the proposals will also mean designing

other programs for the physical space of the virtual school facility. I hope to include in this a spoken word office, a classroom or two. Arceneaux read my mind when he said he wanted to do a Baby College type program. Yes!

I made five quick videos for the ACT Training Community on Blackboard, but I'm not entirely sure they're visible for my students.

The first thing I did today was cry in the shower apologizing to my Dad for not spending the night with him that night in the nursing home. I cried again later when I opened my eyes to find the guitar strap Sarah had custom-made by a leathersmith for me. No decorations, just a deep, dark stain and the initials HFS. Couldn't help the tears. Leo certainly shed some tears today. Sarah and Leo arrived today, if you haven't inferred that already.

I prayed tonight like I used to. I asked God to help me bring out the best in Sarah and to help Sarah bring out the best in me. I asked for wisdom and gave thanks for the signs that had brought me here. I asked for signs that if followed would keep my family safe. It turns out that one can cross from seeing how people benefit themselves quite deludedly with religious faith over to needing that benefit, wanting that benefit that one can suspend one's own disbelief.

Baby and I are sleeping in the living room with the gas heater glowing on us. I can feel his energy and my energy intermingling in the space between us. Such a distinct feeling. One of the best I've ever known. I didn't expect that.

February

Friday, February 1, 2013

It occurs to me to flip the ACT Practice Classroom. To have them view videos the night before. Reinforce the lesson quickly at the beginning of class, call on students who already know answers. Let the information sink in more deeply. Then we do practice sets in class. People get individual attention from partners and me.

Question: What is it about teaching that makes public school teachers bond together so strongly? Is it the amount of time the job takes per week? Is it the pain of feeling ineffectual? Is it the threat of political forces that can take your job away, living in mutual fear? Why does Ravitch continually use the term “noneducators?” Am I a noneducator?

The thing about getting better at taking the ACT is that the primary factor in improving is practice. Practice is how you get better. Habitualization of the processes of reading. Tom started taking this VitaPak because he wanted to get in shape. At first he gagged on a couple pills. He tried different techniques—two at a time, all six at once. The worst of the pack were the sand colored vitamins. Pungent. But now he takes them quickly and without even thinking about methodology. Three at a time, down the hatch, finish the bottle of water. He’s good at it. Efficient. He has achieved “flow.” The same would happen if he shucked oysters for two hours, or cleared a plot of land using a chainsaw, or spent three months sorting mail in the mornings: He would get better at each of these things, doing them ever-better, quicker.²¹

So, reading will make students better readers and therefore better achievers on the ACT reading test. Since there is a greater risk that students will elect NOT to practice for their reading tests at home, we should flip the classroom and have them practice in class, watch videos at

²¹ True stories.

home. Videos that might even have an aspect of entertainment. So in class, they're focused and reading practice ACT Reading Comprehension passages. To ensure that this practice, which I've already established to be vital to any improvement in test scores, takes place at all. Make the videos light, easy, and fun, and that's all kids will have to do for homework. Simple!

This would mean that for next week I can have the PHS students watch the videos on the test before Wednesday's lesson, then we can get more practice passages done—and even discussed! There's rarely any time for that—in class. I can try to have at least some Humanities videos up before Monday.

I will recommend thirty minutes of reading newspaper and magazine ARTICLES per night for guaranteed results.

Put videos on flash drives for students without internet?

Digression: The Story of School Reform

The common school reformers of the mid 19th century failed in most of their pursuits: universal enrollment for rich and poor, widespread enrollment of the Irish, the elimination of pauperism or social disorder. However, as Nasaw compellingly explains, they did succeed

in laying the ideological and institutional groundwork upon which later generations of public schools would be erected.... Though the crusade had failed in the short term, its long-term effects, especially the shift from family and community to school and state as the guardians of the young and watchdogs at the portal of adult life, must not be underestimated. (83-84)

Education reform efforts in the twentieth century must be understood in light of the tension that had developed between capital and labor—rich and poor. Starting in the late 19th century, events like the Homestead Strike demonstrated the antagonism between rich and poor. As workers were largely oppressed and dehumanized, the wealthy's fear of the poor became more evident in many acts of legislation, but especially in the realm of education reform. All

reform efforts in the early 20th century were directed at the poor youth. Immigrants and children of lower classes were described as rude, overly sexual, disrespectful, and generally repugnant. And, most importantly, they were “not only aesthetically and morally displeasing,” but they had the potential to join the many radical and revolutionary movements gaining membership throughout the U.S. (Nasaw 99). The oppressed were becoming rebellious.²²

Fifty years earlier, during the nascence of industrialized society, common school reformers, like Horace Mann, believed that with the proper education (moral and character training), any citizen had an equal chance of achieving financial independence, of “making it” to a position where s/he (but of course mostly “he”) could take ownership of his work and thrive as a human being. But by the beginning of the 20th century, the opportunity to achieve this kind of success was much, much less likely. “Though some workers would succeed in fighting their way to success and economic independence, the majority would not,” writes Nasaw (101). “It was becoming more and more difficult for ambitious young workers to accumulate the capital necessary to raise themselves out of wage work into the mythic promised land of self-employment” (101). The age of the skilled worker had given way to the age of the unskilled worker, and education increasingly became about preparing the masses of the lower classes to enter the unskilled workforce, which entailed the instilling of state-approved “morals” and “character”: passivity, basically.

²² Oh, the irony, that this country was founded on such rebellion against oppression. This is largely what inspired Blake’s concept of Orc as the eternal who represented human rebellion. That this was a threat to the upper classes shows us that America/Albion had become diseas’d so depressingly early in its life.

Monday, February 4, 2013

9:33 a.m.

Couldn't reach students before today to alert them to the video I made for the Humanities section of the ACT Reading Test, so, during first period, I showed them the video on the Promethean smartboard before doing problem sets.

I asked them how they liked watching the video. I said, "It was a little too long, right?"

They actually said no, that it was actually less distracting watching the video than watching me give a lesson. (Not exactly sure what that means.) They laughed at appropriate places during the video and seemed to be learning my methodology for approaching the Humanities Section. I told them to watch the next video before we meet again next Monday, and they agreed. I told them there would be a morning announcement this week and to watch the video at school if they don't have internet access at home. I explained that getting better at the Reading Test entails, most importantly, training and practice. That it's no fun and that they have to want to get better in order for it to work. I explained that by watching the videos beforehand, that would allow us to do more actual training in class, ensuring that they get the proper training, which—let's face it—would be less likely to occur at home. Training is not always fun, but it is absolutely what it takes to master the ACT Reading Test. In this case, training is reading attentively in a timed environment.

6:54 p.m.

Today, after a lunch of salad and bread eaten at a conference table with plastic utensils, a group of us went to Broussard Elementary School, the large "failing" school in the district.

Some money has been thrown at it. They have a multimillion dollar building that consists of two or three pods, short wings with a few classrooms each. This building houses pre-K

through first (first graders were transferred there in December in an attempt to save them from the contamination of the older building).²³ Here we have what seems like two schools, side by side. In the pods, they have a great, new, progressive-looking early education situation. But the huge size of the regular elementary school means that the handfuls of well-nurtured little kids get siphoned into a massive failed system, where everything good they've accomplished and received just wilts away. The "Become what they Behold" effect is central to what causes so much disruptive behavior. Behavior is a major problem at the school, we're told by administrators walking the halls with us, directing us to a conference room—fights breaking out, disrespect, sexual harassment. We were informed that there was only one guidance counselor at the school. Outrageous.

We walked the halls of the older part of the school, the densely populated part, looking into classes and meeting teachers. Mostly the teachers looked tired and kind of dead-faced. The students just looked like students to me. Mostly of color.

We stood in the fifth grade class, and all the teachers and everyone but me and Dr. Mitchell left the room. Dr. Mitchell asked the students if they liked their school, and they decided to be intriguing, saying things like "School ain't what you think it is."

"What's that?" Responded Dr. Mitchell.

"Good." We heard complaints about bullying from both administrators and students. The one guidance counselor agreed that if students felt more comfortable or better able to express themselves or to emote, then there probably wouldn't be so much anger.

"They're just so angry. Some of them don't even know why they're angry."

²³ I repeatedly use the word "contamination" has Geoffrey Canada used it in his very Blakean theory about the way kids influence kids. It can have a positive connotation, too, says Canada. Blake evinces this kind of logic when repeats "The become what the behold" in *Jerusalem*.

I asked the principal and some other administrator if they thought Broussard Parish needed another elementary school to reduce the population of the school. They laughed, but there was pain in their laughter: “Of course! We’ll take one right next door.”

I think they do need another school—that’s maybe what Deborah Meier would say. I think another elementary school—perhaps a progressive one like I could design—would do wonders to set the foundation for future success in the district. Of course, we would also have to fire or transfer ineffective teachers, like the ones referred to by Amanda Mayeaux. I would love to design and run an elementary school. It would be a miracle to be able to do something so meaningful, and so cool. Maybe even this Atchafalaya program...

Digression: The Story of School Reform

As I’ve suggested, in the mid 19th century, manufacturers played a central role in school reform. By the twentieth century, that role had been taken by financiers and corporate executives (Nasaw 108). These reformers found opposition in teacher-and-principal organizations, and those who in general believed in “home rule,” who believed that neighborhoods or religious groups should have autonomy over their schools. Educators and administrators were adamantly opposed to the imposition of a centralized educational system that gave control and supervision of local school communities to people who did not live in these communities and who were neither local parents nor educators (110).

The opponents of centralized school reform were disparate but found common ground in their reasons for opposing centralization: “Not only was it antidemocratic and un-American, it was also bound to adversely affect the schools’ functioning” (110). “The ‘pink tea ladies’ and Wall Street ‘aristocrats’ did not attend the same churches as the neighborhood people, or speak the same language, or even send their children to public school. How then were they going to

look after the neighborhood's classrooms" (110)? The wealthy reformers contended that "replacing the informal, almost personal leadership of local ward trustees and boards with more formal bureaucratic structure would make the schools more efficient as instruments of Americanization, socialization, and disciplinary training" (111).²⁴

In each phase of school reform since the 1830s, school systems were rebranded from serving the elite to serving the masses. "The guiding force behind" the institutionalization of public education in the mid 19th century was really never about educating children as much as it was about "the maintenance of social peace and prosperity. Because the republic and its private property were endangered more by 'immoral' than by illiterate adults, the common schools' responsibility for character training and moral instruction overrode all others" (Nasaw 240). Therefore, one may conclude that public schools "are social institutions dedicated *not* to meeting the self-perceived needs of their students but to preserving social peace and prosperity within the context of private property and the governmental structures that safeguard it" (241-42). Public school is meant to train young people to adapt to the existing social order rather than to inspire them to reimagine or improve their worlds, as Nasaw argues. And this is pretty startling. But Nasaw, writing in the late 1970s, holds onto hope for radical improvement, clinging to the fact that after over a hundred years of intense efforts of "reformers and persons of wealth, social standing, and power" to "remake the public schools" according to their own interests, the designs of the powerful to dehumanize American citizens through "reformed" education, "though never entirely defeated, have not been fully implemented" (242-43).

Could he make this hopeful declaration today? Are the interests of the wealthy still only partially being implemented?

²⁴ For more about replacing local school boards with centralized ones, see Tyack, *One Best System*, 140-45; Callahan, *Education*, 6.

Tuesday, February 2, 2013

8:48 p.m.

Made a video for the Social Science section of the ACT Reading Test and posted it to Blackboard. I have a feeling that none of the videos I've posted have been watched. I guess I could try to see if anything has been, since I enabled tracking views on everything I've posted. OK, so it doesn't appear that I can actually view the statistics of views even though I enabled tracking. This, on top of not being able to email students through blackboard. Lame! Obstructive!

I think I learned how to pronounce "Atchafalaya" today, but I can't be certain.

Wednesday, February 6, 2013

8:10 a.m.

I've been up since Leo started crying at 4 a.m.

Here's what I learned by talking to Heather, a recent LSU graduate who works part-time at Plantation High School giving test prep instructions. She thinks it's "disgusting" the way students misuse and mistreat their MacBooks. "Throwing them to each other, throwing them around, using them to watch YouTube instead of using them to learn." She thinks this is especially a problem with students in 7th and 8th grade.

Her mother teaches at Broussard Elementary. She has been stabbed with pencils and had desks thrown at her. Heather went to St. John, a local private Catholic school. Not uncommon for teachers in this district to not believe in the quality of the public schools. I said, "So it seems like Broussard Elementary has had these same problems for years and years." And she agreed. Heather doesn't think she wants to be a teacher. She seems kind of dismayed to be here. Another girl in her early twenties is in the room, and they are talking about students and whether or not

they should go for sports next year. They are talking about texting and stuff. I notice that the whiteboard has the same writing it did when I came here last week. The date reads “January 31, 2013.”

I’ve been told that there are some athletes in the upcoming ACT classes that I will now take over. Apparently, these athletes are being looked at by colleges and are therefore not intensely motivated to do well on the ACT. There are others, I’m to understand, that just don’t comprehend what they read very well. I think to myself that we will do some practice summarizing passages, and that should serve as good practice to strengthen reading comprehension skills.

Anticipation building. How I want to start: “Do you have to be here or do you choose to be here? OK, so you want to be here. I want to be here, too. I’m going to make a PROMISE that you will be able to score at least an 18 on the Reading Test.²⁵ Who believes me?”

I’m going to suggest that they ALL leave the hardest passage for last and use LOTD. Start slow, acquire good form, get faster and stronger. How would you train for a five mile race? Or an important basketball game, one that would determine your future, and you basically NEVER play basketball? What exercises does the coach have you do at the beginning of the season? Sprints!

9:48 a.m.

First hour went well, considering that I had only three students, all seniors, and all REQUIRED to receive ACT Training. They didn’t seem to believe in themselves, and they seemed reluctant to answer—one girl, Allison, in particular. The weird thing is that I totally had

²⁵ I actually made this promise. And making this promise was something I took directly from Geoffrey Canada’s speech to parents as he was planning to open his first Promise Academy. He promised that their kids would be able to get into college. See Paul Tough, *Whatever it Takes*.

her attention and had her laughing. But when it came time, she was extremely reluctant to read me her one-sentence summary. Instead, she put it into casual language (he, like, did this, and, like, did that). It's like it's embarrassing to try or to use a different "code," i.e. standard English. Skye was really wriggling as he tried to get into reading, but, once he did, he did well and summarized the passage adequately. They all seemed to struggle with reading the passage. I guess it's hard to focus on something boring, foreign, erudite, written in a dialect unfamiliar and historically oppressive. I would be among the worst of them.

Now it's many minutes into third hour and—oh!—here's one student.

Digression: No Child Left Behind

The capability of banking education to minimize or annul the students' creative power and to stimulate their credulity serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed. (Freire 60)

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 can be thought of as an extension of the desire of education reformers to give decision-making power about schools' educational goals to centralized, governmental entities rather than local school districts. In the beginning of the last decade, there was an emphasis on allowing states to determine how they wanted to assess their schools, but lately there has been a major push toward establishing national uniformity in how students are assessed through the Common Core standards program. As will soon become clear, the NCLB Act has become the cause for a great deal of criticism amongst educators and educational theorists. Many believe that the NCLB Act has severely hindered the ability for teachers to help their students become good learners and critical thinkers. A teacher I talked to yesterday told me he was certain the public school system would be dismantled within the decade because of the punitive accountability of NCLB. The principal of an elementary school told me two weeks ago that the way NCLB has changed her job disgusts her, as she is

continually prevented from doing what she thinks is best for her students in order to do what she can to protect her teachers and herself from losing their licensure. The vast majority of educators I have spoken with have negative feelings about the NCLB Act.²⁶ People do show some recognition of the importance of accountability, the issue at the heart of NCLB, and this is key to understanding how a collection of legislation that is so reviled now could have ever been allowed to pass.

The NCLB Act of 2001 was an act of legislation presented by George W. Bush three days after his inauguration (Ravitch 93). It would become monumental in the way it united right and left parties—a movement that at the time seemed very hopeful. Bush described four principles the act would address: “first, that every child should be tested every year in grades three through eight, using state tests, not a national test; second, that decisions about how to reform schools would be made by the states, not by Washington; third, that low-performing schools would get help to improve; and fourth, that students stuck in persistently dangerous or failing schools would be able to transfer to other schools” (Ravitch 94). It was the in effect an extension of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, an act created to provide federal aid to schools.

Given the way the act expanded federal power over schools and heavily emphasized standardized testing, you would have expected the bill to meet staunch opposition from both parties, but there was huge bipartisan support for the principle of “accountability” (Ravitch 94) and the bill passed with large majorities. As Ravitch explains, the act grew out of growing consensus between Republicans and Democrats during the 1990s—a collective dismay at the

²⁶ The only person that likes it is the operator of a virtual charter school, whom I’ll interview in a few weeks, and I’m pretty sure she likes testing because it gives her a chance to prove that her virtual school is delivering a high quality education. Now, whether or not that’s true is beyond the scope of this footnote.

“lack of accountability” in American public education. They “bemoan[ed]...that no teacher, principal, or student was held *accountable* for poor test scores” (Ravitch 96, my emphasis). NCLB was a large, complex act that would likely have turned off officials on both left and right if it had not been for the strong central focus on accountability: “Both parties agreed that accountability was the lever that would raise achievement” (Ravitch 98).

Thursday, February 7, 2013

1:04 p.m.

Sandra called me five minutes after I’d arrived to a meeting with teachers at East Broussard High School. She said that Dr. Arceneaux wanted to meet earlier than originally scheduled. So I rushed over to MSA-West to meet Sandra. We later left in Melanie Godchaux’s colossal white SUV—the four of us, Arceneaux, Melanie, Sandra, me—for North Broussard, the high school facility that has been shut down for the last four years. We drove along bayous, past fishing camps, people in fishing boats motoring to work. Melanie and Sandra exchanged stories about growing up “down the bayou” and about how their accents get “flatter” the longer they’re at home. Melanie talked about having to consciously think about not having a “flat” Louisiana accent when she talked. We passed a sign that in red paint advertised “Fresh Coon Meat.” We passed Satsuma Elementary—the future site of our “choice” school with a humanities program that revolves around the Atchafalaya Swamp. Oaks and Spanish moss and ramshackle houses and bayous and then we were at North Broussard.

In the elementary school portion, which is still in full operation, we stopped by a computer lab in which children were completing math problems. I think it was a Ms. Alvarez teaching. But she was FACILITATING. I asked her if she liked using the computer programs, and she was enthusiastic.

Arceneaux actually asked the children this, “Do you children LIKE using computers?”

They responded with a big consensus: “Yeeeessss!” Apparently, they like using computers.

I asked Ms. Alvarez if the computer system of teaching helped her give more individual attention to students and she said, “Yes.” I asked her if it helped her get to know her students better and she said “Yes.” Just as I suspected! After reading *Flip Your Classroom*.²⁷

Then we checked out the high school building, where the virtual school will be housed. It’s beautiful. Huge, rectangular, brick, historical, with two floors, three stairwells. When we first enter the side of the building, there are masses of yellowed lady bugs in the stairwell. We continue into the building. The walls are faded peach, the carpet dark green. The smell is musky. There’s a library full of mottled books. File cabinets holding old projects on black leaders. A home economics area with stove ranges and sinks and counters. A computer lab with slightly antiquated desktop PCs that are actually all on. In standby mode, but on. This confuses me. Could they have been sitting here running for four years?

I take some notes. Arceneaux gets a phone call. I wander upstairs. I enter an old computer lab. More computers, all of them on. Through the windows you can see the gigantic live oaks in front of the school, and through some trees and brush across the narrow road, a still bayou. The paint in the corner of the room is all bubbled up and peeling, and there are cracks. On the swath of cork above the chalk board, there are four fish cut out of different-colored construction paper. A word on each fish makes a short, recognizable phrase: NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND. I take a picture with my phone and go back downstairs.

²⁷ *Flip Your Classroom* gives guidelines for the implementation of a flipped classroom. It was written by two teachers from Colorado.

Arceneaux says he wants me to return with a measuring tape and “tablet.” I don’t know if he is referring to, like, an iPad or like a pen and paper. But anyway. I told him I had a friend in architecture at UCLA and he got a real twinkle in his eye. This school, I learned, is going to be called MSA-Virtual. I’m going to design it. Are you hearing this, Dad?!

Digression: No Child Left Behind

The NCLB Act is commonly thought to have direct lineage from a document called *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, the 1983 report of Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education.²⁸ The document made official the popular notion that American schools were “failing” and helped spark many large-scale educational reform efforts. The report uses a rhetoric that is urgent, even alarmist: “...the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a nation and a people.”²⁹

Mediocrity is posed as some external threat, like the threat of the Other. The word “our” unites all Americans—in response to a threatening Other: This is ironic because many think that understanding the commonality of all U.S. citizens would be the first step in improving the education system. Unfortunately, the simple understanding of ourselves as a unified public occurs here in response to fear and threat. The statement makes it sound like we are on the verge of an attack. The martial rhetoric recalls the steady terror represented by the Cold War.

²⁸ So, there’s this document that was released by the Dept. of Ed like five years ago called “A Nation Accountable.” It’s a follow-up to “A Nation at Risk,” and it is just full of very interesting rhetoric. There’s also the Sandia Report, a document, highly overlooked, that questioned the assertions made in “A Nation at Risk.”

²⁹ For information about the report’s immediate popularity, especially regarding the “rising tide of mediocrity” line, see Tamim Ansary, “Education at Risk: Fallout from a Flawed Report.” <<http://www.edutopia.org/landmark-education-report-nation-risk>>

Education becomes like a weapon with which we can attack foreign invaders: “We have, in effect, been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament.”

A Nation at Risk declared that American students were grossly underachieving in a global context and made 38 recommendations for school reform. But there was some controversy over *A Nation at Risk*. A document called *The Sandia Report* suggested that perhaps the U.S. educational system was not as bad as *A Nation at Risk* made things seem. The Sandia Report found that proficiency in math, reading, and science had actually improved slightly or stayed the same from 1973 to 1988. A statistical event called Simpson’s paradox caused it to appear that proficiency had decreased, but the collaborators of the *Sandia Report* measured student performance by subgroup and were therefore able to correct mistakes made in *A Nation at Risk*. There are allegations that the report was supposed to be buried, and that its authors were threatened, but there is no proof of this.

Monday, February 11, 2013

So, I’ve taken measurements at North Broussard; I’ve taken pictures of the computer stations in the LSU library. I still need to go out and visit the virtual school facilities in Livingston Parish and Ascension Parish to see how things look and run.

I have done some research on Ascension Parish’s virtual magnet school. They call it APPLe, which is an acronym for Ascension Parish Programs for Learning and eSchool or something like that. It began as a program for students to be able to complete high school from home—it was for troubled teens or sick teens or antisocial teens. Now they’re trying to expand the program to whoever wants it. They get around the seat time requirements mandated by the state for students to graduate. APPLe students can be from 2nd grade to 12th, I believe.

I need to know how many students are anticipated for our virtual school at North. I need to know if it's plausible to fix the roof and seal the place up so bugs can't get in. I think the rooms need new floors—maybe that shiny coated concrete that's popular these days? Maybe there are beautiful hardwoods under the carpet. What should be included in the school? Some small tutoring rooms? Group tutoring corrals with large computer monitors? A lecture area for professional development? If so, how many will it have to seat? Will it need an alarm system? What kind of security will protect the technology within?

These are the practical questions I am considering. But I also need to consider the bigger picture. What are the social implications of this project? Who does it help, and who does it endanger? Is it a purely good move? What kind of improvements will this make to the district? Will more students graduate because of it? Will more students achieve higher GPAs and test scores? (Should we conduct free test-taking classes in the afternoons? If so, how many students do we need to be able to seat? Do we need desks?) One way of evaluating the project is to look at Ascension Parish and the results its digital school have produced. Why does Dr. Arceneaux want this? (In part, I think it is to win the favor of the people who he pissed off by closing North Broussard High School.)

When I went in to take measurements there was a custodial worker inside, gathering books. I asked her if she was a teacher, and she said she was a custodian. She turned on some lights for me. I asked her when the school was closed and she said her son was in 11th grade when it closed. I asked her where he went and she said Plantation High. I asked how that was, and she said it was fine. I expected at least some kind of complaint, but maybe this lady just doesn't feel like opening up to the likes of me. So I guess most students went to Plantation—I should talk to Matthew Parry about that. How did that make his job harder, if it did?

Would this virtual magnet school give principals a reason to expel problem students? I need to find some writing on this trend. So far the reading I've been doing has dealt with the more common large questions running through ed reform. Namely, are charter schools a bad idea? How do we "fix" failing schools? A Union City, NJ article in the *New York Times* grazes the surface of how a school district can change.³⁰ Namely, it takes a lot of time, and one must teach students to be good learners so that they can perform well on tests—not just teaching them how to take tests. This follows Amanda Mayeaux's logic that to improve students' scores on the ACT Reading test, you have to teach them to read well and to facilitate their reading practice, starting early.

Digression: Blake's Symbology

"Minute Particular

Albion is composed of Minute Particulars. This metonymic theme of the Minute Particular is important to Blake because the conversion of Albion from Ulro to something in the direction of Jerusalem depends on the conversion of all the individuals of Albion. Minute Particulars can also represent components of the inner self. The concept is that one Minute Particular can receive a radical education (perhaps this individual is particularly susceptible to radical education because she has an abnormally deep capacity for forgiveness or is more prone to act when inspired). Anyway, the revolution to liberate Albion from the state of Ulro depends first a Minute Particular taking radical educational action. Then, the movement must spread, quickly, into a universal effort to ascend to a higher level of reality in which it will become clear that liberation is universally beneficial. This is the task of the teacher, who is a performer.

³⁰ See "The Secret to Fixing Bad Schools," in the *New York Times*, Feb. 2, 2013.

Wednesday, February 13, 2013

Talking with Heather Bunch during planning period about a student who got shot in 8th grade. Students nonchalant about it. Evidence of stunted or inhibited emotional development. (I want to interview Heather's mother, who has taught in Broussard Parish for 18 years or so—she taught at North Broussard Elementary and now teaches at Broussard Elementary. She has, I think, six kids, and it seems like they have all shuffled around from MSA to St. John's to Plantation High. Heather's littlest brother currently attends Satsuma Elementary, the school that we want to turn into a school of choice with a curriculum themed around the Atchafalaya Swamp.)

I believe that MSA Virtual needs to have an after-school tutoring program to help younger kids learn how to read. The way Heather's grandfather taught her to read after school on Tuesdays and Thursdays when she was little. Many students, MANY students are not getting that kind of parental support at home, not getting anyone to sit down with them and help them learn to read. This kind of thing can have disastrous results, leading to higher dropout rates. I think that one-on-one tutoring is the wave of the future. We'll get that with flipped classrooms—teachers moving around the room, giving individual attention (or attending to small groups). Tutors for elementary school students at the MSA Virtual space could really improve long-term achievement for Broussard students. For that reason, we should consider using one of the rooms to split into tutoring corrals or even small rooms with doors that can be closed. Tutoring in reading, writing, math, and science. Call it a Learning Center.

Did I mention the coated concrete floors? Then, how to incorporate purple and gold? Things should be ergonomic, modern, but sturdy, lasting. This is just a fantasy, but what if

students could look out and in front of the school see a beautiful garden planted by a Gardening Club? I really want to both run the school and be an ELA tutor.

What we also need in the North Broussard facility is a video production center for teachers (and students? For special projects?). This would simply entail a few ActivSlates and Macs, headsets, whiteboards, etc. Perhaps the isolated tutoring corrals could serve double duty for this purpose. If teachers could produce videos in this facility, then I or someone else could serve as the second voice on the video, acting in the role of the student-learner while the teacher could serve as the expert. According to Bergmann and Sams, having two voices on a video makes them far more effective—more engaging (45). This might help the teachers produce good videos, too, make them feel more comfortable. If I'm an expert at using the technology, and I'm there to make them feel comfortable and help them feel more natural in their teaching, then this could really be a good thing.

As my students today take their practice Social Studies ACT Reading Tests, I take it along with them. And I annihilate each section, earning perfect scores. Now I want to take more practice tests! If only I could transmit this feeling of flow to them! But alas, they're not doing as well. If only they could feel the improvement I'm now feeling. But how could one make these tests suddenly easy for them?

Friday, February 15, 2013

I've just brought you home—it's our weekend together, so I'm writing as much as I can while you sleep.

I want to process what I experienced yesterday during the sales pitch from an educational technology company called EdGenuity. This pitch turned into a decision-making session that will possibly affect a large number of children, that will change the community. The regional

sales manager, Roe, looked like an overweight Elvis Presley. He was supported by his combed-over account executive, Jeb, and a professional development executive, Nicole, an African American woman with bright make up and braces, a gold-looking necklace of triangles, creating the impression of Egyptian royalty.

All members of this small committee are enthusiastic about the product. Dr. Arceneaux calls on people for their opinions to share with the group, especially Sandra Boyer, Matthew Parry, myself even, to analyze the potential benefits of using this product. I have to convey my sense of surprise to be asked for my input on this matter, which will indeed change the way kids learn in this parish. Kids could have back pains because of me. Spend their lives in front of computers. This could be the digital monster that annihilates teachers' jobs, that imposes a bleak science fiction future of kids in rows in front of computer screens. How easy might it be to brainwash kids in this way? Feed em adderall and plop em in front of a computer screen for eight hours a day. Hell! They can accelerate as fast as they want. Make it 12 hours a day! I mean, are kids really going to get the same kind of learning moments in digital environments, on message boards as they would in a classroom, where courage is required to raise one's voice to the room? Where germs are exchanged? Where empathy is learned?

So why, despite images of rows of empty eyes staring into the digital abyss, did I speak up in favor of purchasing the virtual curriculum several times today? Because I believe this program will lower the dropout rate in Broussard Parish.

Digression: No Child Left Behind

So, educational reformers made the case that U.S. students were way behind the rest of the developed world in reading and math, and the thing that would raise student performance was called accountability. The purpose of the NCLB Act was ostensibly to create a system of

accountability that would awaken educators and administrators to the necessity of increasing the quality of public education. It was a continuation of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which provided federal funds to schools, with an emphasis on providing support to disadvantaged populations, as education reform movements have historically done. NCLB was essentially a renewal of that 1965 act with a systemic method of assessment, high levels of accountability, and rules allowing parents more choices about the schools their children could attend. NCLB required that state tests be given to all students in schools receiving federal aid. Federal aid or sanctions became tied to student performance on these standardized tests: If students failed to achieve what the state determines to be “proficient,” then funding could be withheld from the school. Additionally, schools receiving federal aid must demonstrate a satisfactory, ever-increasing AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) grade. Teachers whose students fail to increase their AYP scores year by year, over the course of three years, could lose their licensure. Principals whose teachers lose licensure are also at risk of losing both their teaching certification and principal’s license. Schools whose students do not produce satisfactory AYPs will face funding cuts, must allow students to transfer to other schools, and will eventually be closed or taken over by an outside entity. With these dire consequences for failing to meet state and federal requirements, it is hoped that schools and teachers will take their jobs more seriously and do what it takes to provide the kind of quality education that will enable students to perform well on standardized assessments, thereby helping our nation to become as well-educated as the many nations outscoring the U.S. (Ravitch).

Monday, February 18, 2013: Seeking Approval

Another morning making copies of the ACT Reading Test—Social Studies section. Spent a lot of time thinking about my career goals this weekend, while I took care of Leo. Just me and Leo. I loved every second of it.

I've taught two hours—one was to only one student, who absolutely destroyed the practice tests. After I was done with Hour One, the teacher whose classroom I borrow seemed very impressed. "That went well," she said to me as I was packing up. Ah ha! Flipping works because it provides time for students to learn in the classroom *by doing*. I'll repeat: They learn *by doing*. And my assumptions have been correct. Not a single student has completed a single practice test at home. You can't get them to do stuff at home. So let's just work with that. Organically, it makes sense to have them learn by doing in the classroom. We should expand on this, using a block schedule, so each class period is 1.5 hours rather than only one, and by implementing a year-round school year. And of course by purchasing EdGenuity and teaching teachers to make videos. I believe in this system.

7:53 p.m.

Mrs. Edwards, during my Fifth Hour ACT lesson, which is my biggest, and just before lunch, but still was a great success in my opinion, connected to my explanation of my role as blended learning trainer by way of the concept of change. She seems to be of the faith that change is necessary. She's really nice and reminds me of Susie kind of.

I ran 8.5 miles today and again listened to RUN D.M.C. During my run I dreamed of starting a Charter School with Bookman and Cates called The Progress Learning Center in

Durham.³¹ We'd focus our curriculum to an extent around the concept of urban agriculture. We'd have massive gardens and maybe even eat one lunch per week grown entirely on campus. We'd build the building out of recycled shipping containers. Jared, Joe, and I would be equal co-directors and each have a secondary position. Me as English teacher, Jared as counselor, Joe as maybe digital media or media studies or something. We could draw faculty from PhD programs in their respective areas. We could probably get a lot of applications and choose great faculty members and pay them a salary close to what they'd get in a tenure track situation. With an entirely flipped mastery learning curriculum, faculty could occasionally go on sabbatical and get support for academic achievements and activity.³² So all faculty have PhDs for the most part—not a rigid rule. Progress Learning Center: the most coherent dream I've ever had. The name could be changed as could the location, I suppose. There would have to be a lot of funding work, but I really think we could do it. I think it would be awesome, and I think we could make good livings doing very good work as a core team built on trust.

Digression: On “Accountability”

So, the tough love of “accountability” is supposed to increase teacher and administration performance. Accountability, as it is used in the legislation of NCLB, means using administrative, data-collecting mechanisms to increase student performance (Figlio and Loeb 384). Accountability systems generate rewards or sanctions to public schools based on their aggregate student scores on standardized tests. As Figlio and Loeb write it, “Measuring and

³¹ Bookman and Cates are the last names of my friends from high school who both have graduate degrees. They are great, smart people with whom I would love to collaborate in the future. Incidentally, I met them and know them and keep in touch with them only because we went to public school together.

³² Flipped mastery means that all students work at an individual pace so that they can take more time (or less) to “master” each unit before moving on. This helps ensure students are adequately prepared for tests, and also that they have the chance to learn before being assessed. See *Flip Your Classroom*.

reporting school performance and attaching positive and negative consequences to meeting or failing to meet performance objectives provides incentives that encourage educators to concentrate on the subjects and materials that are being measured and to potentially alter the methods through which they educate students” (386-87). Knowing that they could lose their jobs, teachers now are supposed to “concentrate” and possibly come up with “methods” to help their students perform well on “subjects and materials that are being measured.”

As I stated, both sides of the political spectrum were drawn to the issue of accountability in the late 1990s. This is understandable. In many cases, students *did* deserve better, safer schools with better teachers, and a little accountability never hurts when it comes to trying to improve the education we give to our youth. Supporters of NCLB may have had disparate objectives (in hindsight, this seems clear), but accountability sounded good to everyone. Since the act has been in place, Diane Ravitch has complicated the issue of accountability by asking her reading public to “Consider the distinction between what we might think of as ‘positive accountability,’ where low scores trigger an effort to help the school, and ‘punitive accountability,’ where low scores provide a reason to fire the staff and close the school” (163). Ravitch concludes that “Accountability as we know it now is not helping our schools. Its measures are too narrow and imprecise, and its consequences too severe” (163). Instead of punishing low-performing schools by reducing resources, she argues, why not give them the resources they need to do better?

Because accountability pretty much just means standardized testing with huge consequences tied to performance, the most noticeable effect of NCLB for teachers and students was that it initiated a new era of heavy, high-stakes testing in our public schools. Hundreds (THOUSANDS?) of neighborhood schools have been closed since 2001 because of unacceptable

aggregate scores on standardized tests. Closing schools is terrible for communities, and it definitely “leaves children behind.” But this system of punitive accountability wouldn’t be such a sore subject for so many, if the quality of the standardized tests was something given more attention, especially in the early years of the legislation.

Ravitch’s complaint about punitive accountability rests on the obvious realization that tests are inherently imperfect and limited.³³ As someone who has taken many such tests, I have always thought of multiple choice tests in general as just problematic and reductive in a lot of ways. It seems absurd that such a poor method of measurement could determine whether a school will be supported, crippled, or closed and replaced by something private. Still, Ravitch contends that “Testing was not the problem. Tests can be designed and used well or badly” (150). Ravitch’s frustration recalls the frustration of early twentieth century educators and administrators who had to deal with the strong push for centralized control over education—people from outside the community making huge decisions that only impact that community. Ravitch’s frustration is this system of punitive accountability is coming down from elected officials who usually have no experience as educators and no knowledge of what it is like to dedicate your life to educating young people from all kinds of backgrounds. She writes:

The problem was the misuse of testing for high-stakes purposes, the belief that tests could identify with certainty which students should be held back, which teachers and principals should be fired or rewarded, and which schools should be closed—and the idea that these changes would inevitably produce better education. Policy decisions that were momentous for students and educators came down from elected officials who did not understand the limitations of testing. (Ravitch 150)

³³ For example, Hursh suggests that standardized test results are better at predicting a student’s income status than the quality of her learning.

Wednesday, February 20, 2013: Tour of Virtual Schools

This morning I left early to get to Plantation High School early enough to make copies of the Natural Science Passage packet for the ACT Training course. I left a message on the whiteboard for Heather to please consult the email I sent her about showing the video I posted to Blackboard. I scurried off to Port Allen to meet Sandra Boyer and someone named Mrs. Landry.

Sandra was getting out of her Xterra as I pulled up. A maroon Toyota pulled up and Sandra got in the back seat. I followed suit and got into the car and met a woman with ice eyes, highlighted hair, and a long, thin nose. It smelled like perfume and coffee in the car, but it was not noxious—pleasant, actually. We took I-10 to Boyer Bridge, a place reputed to house a supreme Zydeco brunch spot. I'd seen a colleagues video footage of mimosas and people doing the two-step.

In Boyer Bridge we visited the St. Martin Technology and Virtual Learning Center. We were met by one of the Center's facilitators, a young man with a thin and tapering beard, and led to the office of Kellie H. LeBlanc, Supervisor of Technology and Virtual Learning for St. Martin Parish School District.

The Virtual School is in its first year, using the EdGenuity curriculum suite (let's call it). She has a large frame but her hearty bone structure gives her a loveliness. She has red hair and kind blue eyes. Her necklace and bracelet match and there are pictures everywhere of family—a daughter and son in poses with backdrops and pictures of a baby. Her screen saver flashes pictures of a hospital birth reception experience during our entire talk. I recognize the swaddle blankets, metal carts, and plastic bassinets. Her daughter's baby, who never cries, we're told, is four months old. The ladies I'm with both point to me and explain that I also have a four month old.

“He’s pretty good,” I say. “Sleeps like 12 hours a night.”

Mrs. LeBlanc is “very satisfied”—she says it that way twice—with EdGenuity. She uses it for grades 7 through 12 but is eager to expand to the earlier grades. This is something with which Sandra disagrees. The three of us decide in the maroon Toyota that younger kids need the socialization that comes with classroom instruction, not to mention the hands-on learning.

Mrs. LeBlanc really likes that teachers can “customize” their courses through EdGenuity. They can take parts out as needed, to accommodate particular students. The St. Martin Technology and Virtual Learning Center services about 130 students, part-time and full-time. Some students are actually dual full-time: They take a full course load on campus and a full online course load. Some students choose to do part of their high school curriculum online and part on campus, for whatever reason. The seat time requirement in Louisiana has been waived, so students can move at their own pace by using EdGenuity. In the facility she has two facilitators—certified teachers—full time during the day and one at night. There is a homebound teacher (I think this means a teacher who visits homebound students in their homes) who works one day per week. The two during the day are experts in math and English respectively, and the one at night is a science teacher.

The facility is open from 8-7 Monday through Thursday and 8-4 pm on Friday. No individual instruction is offered between 8 and 9 a.m., and only between 2 and 4 p.m. can parents come to enroll their children.

When a course begins, the parent and student sign a contract saying that the student will stay on top of the coursework.

They piloted the school last summer. They used flyers to attract students and actually charged \$300 dollars per course for credit recovery. They offered courses to students in area

parishes for \$350 per course. The summer school lasted four weeks, 8 am – 12 pm, four certified teachers in the building.

The Wall Street Journal has covered Boyer Bridge’s Virtual School. Mrs. LeBlanc claims that the district has taken some home school and private school students back. (That’s good!)

Students can come into the center any time: But usually students just come in to take tests. They HAVE to have their tests unlocked by the facilitator and to be observed during tests. When students come into the center, they turn in their cell phones at the door. They can get lunch from the adjoining junior high, if they bring in exact change. The corner of the main room has been made into a Reading Center: It consists of three somewhat cheap—but comfortable and colorful—collapsible chairs. They had outside time/recess time for kids for a little while, but that was more trouble than it was worth.

The School uses two busses that pick up and drop off at major locations, like grocery store parking lots, and students have to call in advance if they plan to use the bus. Parents provide transportation for sports.

If a student starts falling behind in an EdGenuity course, then a parent/teacher conference is held, and attendance for four hours per day becomes mandatory.

One problem that has been noticed is that students can get very frustrated with slowly buffering videos. (Yes, that WOULD be a problem. I have problems with Netflix all the time.)

The three ladies exchange some comments about the new Louisiana state budget; I think they say that like a billion dollars is being cut from education. And by the way, when Mrs. LeBlanc raises her eyebrows because we explain that we have a one-to-one laptop initiative going on, she asks about the money, and the answer is “Grants.” Apparently, we have some serious grants. I wonder why. MFP means money given to the district by the state to

accommodate an individual student. More students leave to private schools and home schooling, less money for the schools. It's a big deal.

There is no GPA requirement in place for students to take courses through the Virtual School. Perhaps this is why they have such a healthy number of clients. Ms. LeBlanc says, "You need fish in the stream to call the stream working."

Tests can be taken at home schools, if the student desires. They make an appointment, have to wear uniform and bring ID. A librarian proctors the test.

EdGenuity automatically sends progress reports to parents, and this can be done daily, weekly, or monthly.

This is their first year using EdGenuity, and Mrs. LeBlanc seems very happy with the courseware. The Virtual School seemed to be running very smoothly. Kids sitting at computers with headphones on seemed happy to be there not in uniform. They seemed happy.

I learned that the laboratory space doesn't need to be too fancy. After visiting this site and the next site in Lafayette, I've realized that it would be unnecessary to spend a lot of money renovating the North Broussard site. It's already set up. Get rid of some stuff and change the aesthetic of drab pink and old carpet. But structurally, I think it could be left much the same. Large closet areas could be used as individual tutoring rooms. (Take the doors off? Or put glass doors?)

We had time to waste so we drove to Lafayette, approximated the location of the next virtual school, and landed at a place called Guidry's Reef for lunch. Ms. Landry wanted "seafood, ya'll." Her gumbo was watery and salad consisted of salad and heaping piles of colorless, boiled shrimp, crawfish, and crab. All was pale and unseasoned. We talked about the positive impression we had been given of the virtual school in Boyer Bridge.

Feeling more comfortable, I asked more direct questions about what they felt was *wrong* with the Broussard Parish School District. And they said that, basically, politics and bad teachers were the problem. You can't fire some key bad teachers because it would piss off certain school board members. There's a good amount of negative attention on Wake Field High School. I said on the way home, finally, "so, basically, Wake Field is going to close. I mean that's on the horizon. Just no one wants to say it?"

And Sandra, a lover of truth, couldn't resist the opportunity to be candid and said, "Yeah, basically." Because it costs so much to staff the school with teachers, cafeteria workers, etc, and there is such a tiny student population. Donaldsonville High is going to have to merge with Wake Field somehow, probably under the guise of the transition to a "choice" school program, where there are different schools with differently themed curricula.

Now I remember when Dr. Arceneaux turned around in the front seat of Melanie's car on the way out to North Broussard. He said easily the most gratifying and exciting thing an employer has ever said to me: "It seems like... you like to *design* things." He wants me to be the person to design these schools of choice that will ultimately serve the purpose of dissolving Wake Field in a careful manner that will both raise the district's ranking and not piss too many people off too badly.

After lunch at Guidry's Reef, we went to Lafayette to see the eCampus virtual learning center. We were met by Jarett Coutee, a man of typically atypical ethnic mix in Louisiana—Asian, black, white, who knows what else. He's barrel-chested. He has short, gelled hair, a pressed black shirt, and gray slacks. He's smiley. He has a limp handshake.

The eCampus in Lafayette looks similar to Boyer Bridge's facility. A room with PCs. Some kids working on them. Here, though, there was a glassed-in tutoring corral.

Hours: the center is open from 10 a.m. until 7 p.m., Monday through Friday. On site are 1 certified teacher, 1 teaching assistant, and 2 tutors from UL-Lafayette. Jarrett attests that the facility always needs 1 manager and some tutors—1 facilitator per 20 students.

Tutors do not get trained in tutoring, but they do get trained in using EdGenuity. If possible, Jarrett says, he would only employ college tutors. They're awesome and cheap. He only pays them \$10 per hour. The tutors travel to satellite facilities to tutor kids at their zone schools.

Jarrett says he doesn't want to reinvent the wheel (a cliché I've heard many times during the past few weeks). He wants to model his school after Kellie LeBlanc's school. In fact, we were going to visit Boyer Bridge "next week."

He has been using EdGenuity (e2020) for 3.5 years. He says the most important thing is "learning to trust the curriculum" and to learn to go from sage on the stage to something more like a "coach slash manager."

"We're very satisfied" with EdGenuity. "We have to" move towards virtual learning for children.

At the main eCampus site, tests are proctored and observed (is that redundant?), but not quizzes. Traveling to the main site becomes an issue so there has been a move to get librarians at students' home zone schools to proctor tests. Testing satellites are the move he's trying to finish making: he wants all schools to be testing satellites for the virtual school. This helps students complete courses more quickly: They don't have to wait until transportation can be provided so that a facilitator can unlock a test.

Students get orientated to the virtual school at their home zone school. They wear ID Tags that say “Virtual Learner.”

Digression: Blake’s Symbology

The “Spectre”

Responsibility for liberating society lies on the shoulders of every Minute Particular. But unfortunately, Blake suggests, every person has a Spectre, or Selfhood, who, while seeking to protect the human, attempts to contract, reduce, and fix reality into a rigid system for self-benefit. The Spectre is associated with Satan, using logic to justify acts of selfishness and inspiring fear of the Other.

The Spectre is the Reasoning Power in Man; & when separated
From Imagination, and closing itself as in steel in a Ratio
Of the Things of Memory, It thence frames Laws & Moralities
To destroy Imagination! the Divine Body, by Martyrdoms & Wars. (Blake 307)

When reasoning power is not used in conjunction with the imagination it devises ways to “destroy Imagination.” This kind of rejection of ideas that do not conform to the “Laws & Moralities,” which are “Things of Memory” perpetuated by unimaginative reason results in “opaque hardnenses covering all Vegetated things” (297).³⁴ Ideas that might grow, or evolve, or change, become fixed by the language of law and morality. No longer can we imagine a oneness with the things around us. The next step is war, horror, oppression that masquerades as liberty.

³⁴ “Covering” is an important idea in Blake. The Covering Cherub often refers to logical explanations of the world that in delineating the nature of a thing attempts to prevent imaginative contemplation or re-contemplation of the world. Things become opaque; only surfaces are visible, and knowing the world only through surfaces brings difference—instead of communality—to the forefront of our thinking. This is antithetical to modes of thought like Spinoza’s, for whom things are translucent, meaning that these thinkers look at essences to find commonality and foster community, rather than opaque surfaces, which foster disunity.

The Spectre is an especially instructive, if diabolical, entity in *Jerusalem* and the rest of Blake's late poetry because it helps us name our own selfishness. The structure and repetition of the poems seem to suggest that familiarity with the nature of the Spectre will help Blake's reader develop a critical consciousness of that aspect of his nature, which, in turn, gives him some power in controlling the Spectre. That the Spectre can be controlled is perhaps the most important lesson in this bit of Blake's curriculum. The best place to learn about the Spectre in *Jerusalem* is near the poem's climax: The central tension in the poem is the division of Enitharmon from Los.³⁵ The Spectre is a force hungering to cause a division between Los and Enitharmon: The hunger he shows is symbolically the hunger to isolate all people, to bring Ulro.

The section in which the Spectre essentially tries to break up Los's marriage to Enitharmon works well because the mutual forgiveness and compassion symbolized in this poem by the union of marriage becomes metonymic for the best version of the larger human community. Here Blake may be thinking of actual events in his life that pulled him into an Ulroic realm of self-righteousness and entitlement, since his marriage to Catherine was strained at times, largely because of disagreements about Blake's ideals of sexual freedom.

The Spectre is the self-pitying voice that resents the feelings of others out of self-concern. When the narrator tells us, "Two Wills they [Los and Enitharmon] had; Two Intellects: & not as in times of old," we get the sense that the very foundation of *Jerusalem*, the house of loving marriage, is under attack, threatening Albion's death because formerly, it is implied, they were of

³⁵ Enitharmon is Los's emanation. A female entity that is a source of compassion in Los's education. Los and Enitharmon loosely parallel Blake and his wife Catherine, and the episode of this fictional separation probably resembles marital problems Blake and Catherine had. In this way, this part of Blake's mythopoeia invites us to raise some questions about the relationship between the personal and the social, the ideal and the practical. Ultimately, we have to decide what kind of action we are willing to take in the world to bring ourselves and each other from Ulro to *Jerusalem*.

one mind and of one desire (326). “Two Wills” suggests that each has become too self-concerned to collaborate and communicate to make things mutually better. This is further evinced when Los says that ““when the Male & Female/ Appropriate Individuality, they become an Eternal Death”” (331). That may sound a little harsh, but I think Blake means that the Eternal force of compassion or unity dies in that real-world situation. The poem suggests that when one’s life-partner is selfish, a reaction of deep resentment is common: “It is easier to forgive an Enemy than to forgive a Friend” (332).

So, in the midst of Los and Enitharmon’s marital crisis, The Spectre, “eyeing/ Enitharmon” “joy[s]” the following passage, (327):

‘The Man who respects Woman shall be despised by Woman
And deadly cunning & mean abjectness only, shall enjoy them.
For I will make their places of joy & love, excrementitious.
Continually building, continually destroying in Family feuds
While you are under the dominion of a jealous Female
Unpermanent for ever because of love & jealousy.
You shall want all the Minute Particulars of Life.’ (327)

The Spectre plays on Los’s (and all of our) tendencies to reduce complex reality into rules or neat narratives. In Ulro, the state of reality that the Spectre wants to impose on Los, man treating a woman with respect, which I take to mean compassion and empathy, ingredients in a broad perspective, will translate to vulnerability, and this vulnerability will be met with despising. Truly taking the woman’s perspective into account and being completely honest with the woman (for a visionary like Blake to be totally honest with Catherine, would doubtless mean an impassioned case for the merits of free, bisexual love), will lead to nothing but cunning and meanness. The Spectre, who will “continually” be there (the Spectre is eternal) uses fear and logic to convince Los that he will make Los and Enitharmon’s community, which has the potential to consist of “joy & love,” something “excrementitious,” which is probably just a

humorous way of saying the Spectre will make Los's life with Enitharmon, which was formerly joyous, "shitty." The Spectre pledges to keep meddling so that a stable, loving environment will be impossible, now building Jerusalem, now destroying it, and all the while, the Spectre vows, Los will be unable to work, suffering in his own private Ulro, constrained by the Laws and Moralities imposed while he's "under the dominion of a jealous Female."³⁶ The most important thing to Los is constructing imaginative objects in the form of plates that will serve the purpose of facilitating a radical education. Jerusalem is his goal, permanent liberation. The Spectre here promises that he will never allow that kind of loving permanence to arrive because jealousy is contagious and the Spectre is permanent. As long as he lives, Los will "want" the freedom to enjoy pleasures that his marriage bonds forbid. He is forever to stare longingly from the prison window of his marriage, poor guy.

Enitharmon does in fact divide from Los, and "A sullen smile broke from the Spectre in mockery & scorn,/ Knowing himself the author of their divisions & shrinkings, gratified/ At their contentions." As if in a weird, ritualistic preparation to consume Los, the Spectre wipes his tears and washes his "visage" (327). The Spectre believes that he has prevented Los from completing his work and fulfilling his mission to redeem Albion through the education of mutual forgiveness.

Thursday, February 21, 2013

AP English. Ms. LeBlanc says no one better get on her nerves because they are shot, and she thinks she's going to throw up. The AP students are quiet and focused. They diligently work on their practice passage. If they choose not to, they at least quietly look at their phones (most of these students I have seen in my ACT Prep course).

³⁶ Sutherland shows that female jealousy is a prominent theme in Blake's poetry—a conflict which becomes assuaged with time, as Blake decides that sex is not really a means to eternity. See Sutherland, p. 296.

The room is decorated like many other rooms I have visited: laminated encouragements like “Believe you can Achieve” and “Make an Effort. Not an Excuse.” And there are mobiles hanging from the ceiling that I think have something to do with Valentine’s Day and literary couples. There is a poster curled at the edges entitled “Alfred the Great.”

Friday, February 22, 2013

Visit to Louisiana Connections Academy in Baton Rouge. LA Connections is a Type II Charter School and a kind of subsidiary yet rival with Connections Learning, a national education corporation, which actually happens to be owned by Pearson. (I think I’m going to have to talk about Pearson in my dissertation. And I definitely have to talk about Bobby Jindal and the voucher program. Arceneaux seemed upset about vouchers. I think these vouchers award private schools money for students from the public state budget. This takes money from the public schools. Education is becoming privatized.

Connections Academy is maxed out on students. First dibs is students already enrolled; second dibs is their siblings; third dibs is at-risk students (unpack that!); and there is a waitlist. A very long waitlist of over a thousand students. (I need to verify this in an interview, but it would be hard to ask these questions and get uninhibited responses—and not RAISE suspicions.)

“Bettie” (I THINK this was the name—see? everyone seems to know each other. We walk into the space, an office suite in a little office village on Goodwood Ave. Ed exclaims God DANG! when he sees a blond woman come to the door of her office. He hugs her. Other people walk it. Other people exclaim and hug, some shake hands. There is a VERY positive vibe. Educators who know each other from way back in the day, from being on this board or that.

Ed Arceneaux: he's a ruddy, rugged-looking man, and he's charismatic, always on, larger than life. He's either smiling or giving you a look that'll turn your guts to stone. He puts each person on the spot and seems to like people who can handle it. People like the challenge of handling being put on the spot. There's a fun paternalism to him. He wears his position of power like an awesome cloak. Checking his phone while private sector sales people try to break through to him, making—not just answering—phone calls in the middle of meetings. Either winking at or staring right through you. “Ima be there for ya, son,” he said to me as we were leaving Superior Grill. We'd had a margarita together. As I sit here a couple hours later, I still feel an odd giddiness.

Before too much time goes by I want to talk about what felt emotionally like the change in water temperature from a pocket of warm in the shallow of a lake to the colder sensation of being in a deeper part. As we left the pushed-together tables at Superior Grill, the Broussard folks went one direction, and the Connections Learning folks and I went in another. As we walked, the sales fellow (who had a slight air of victimization about him) asked where I was from. And if there was anywhere I wanted to return to. I jerked the both them around a little by revealing that I was just learning why public school people weren't so fond of the concept of charter schools. It's what, “the MHP money?”

Bethany corrected, “MFP money.”

“Yeah,” I told them, “I've had dreams of opening a charter school with some of my friends from home. With a curriculum surrounding the theme of Urban Agriculture. But it's probably just a fantasy.”

“No,” they said in unison.

“You have to dream big,” said Bethany.

Digression: Children Left Behind

The irony of the title the Bush administration chose for their act has not escaped the attention of critics. In this section, after reporting on the good things people have said about the NCLB Act, I'll talk about two ways that NCLB can be considered to have, in fact, left many children behind. First, because the new constraints forced upon educators and principals regarding standardized test scores and "school scores" more broadly, some educators and principals have been forced to "game" the system in order to protect their jobs and to ensure that their schools don't get shut down. Gaming the system has largely entailed taking measures to force very low-performing students out of their schools, thus leaving them behind. Second, the high stakes nature of standardized tests has caused teachers and administrators to narrow their curricula, reducing education to preparation to perform well on these tests, and this, some argue, leaves a lot of children behind, from an educational-theoretical standpoint.

Ravitch writes that "The intense pressure generated by demands for accountability leads many educators and school officials to boost the scores in ways that have nothing to do with learning" (155). One way is for choice schools, which have been popping up rapidly nationwide (and which we'll talk about momentarily), to restrict admission (Ravitch 155). "Whenever there is competition for admission, canny principals have learned how to spot the kids who will diminish their scores and how to exclude them without appearing to do so" (Ravitch 156). "Not only do choice schools look better if they exclude laggards, but the traditional public schools look worse, because they must by law accept those who were not admitted to or were booted out of the choice schools" (Ravitch 156). New schools pop up, often replacing neighborhood schools that have failed to meet the standards set as a result of NCLB, and they restrict admission to low-performing students, widening a perceivable—but misleading—performance gap between choice

schools and neighborhood schools. Taking only the best students out of the neighborhood schools increases the risk that the neighborhood schools will face economic sanctions and eventually be closed. Every time a new choice or magnet program with competitive admission opens in a school district, the neighborhood schools already there will suffer.³⁷

High-stakes accountability systems also cause administrators to focus the school's attention and resources on those students who are just below a passing score on standardized tests (Hursh 506). As Hursh writes, "those students who need the most help are left to fend for themselves" (507).³⁸ Principals in Louisiana, for example, compile lists of students whose scores, for example, on the ACT, are just below 18, the score they need to meet state requirements, and they round up these students, pull them out of their electives, or health, or P.E., and give them test-preparation instead. A great deal of attention and concern surround these on-the-border students because their performance carries huge consequences for a school, determining their standing under NCLB and therefore their financial reward or sanction. Students who have scored very low or above the proficiency line are ignored in this regard.

In a sickly optimistic way, maybe the fact that some students are ignored is a good thing. The emphasis on test-taking strategies rather than subject matter exists in the interest of adults, and this calls attention to the purpose of education in the first place. Ravitch: "What matters most is for the school, the district, and the state to be able to say that more students have reached 'proficiency.' This sort of fraud ignores the students' interests while promoting the interests of adults who take credit for nonexistent improvements" (Ravitch 159). After tons of test-taking preparation, scores may go up, but students are not receiving better educations. "Excessive test

³⁷ Both the school's score will suffer AND there might be some harder-to-detect differences in the school culture.

³⁸ For more on why the most disadvantaged students receive the least help, see Gillborn and Youdell, 2000.

preparation distorts the very purpose of tests, which is to assess learning and knowledge, not just to produce higher test scores” (Ravitch 160).

And although there are students who aren’t directly under the principal’s microscope and receiving the highest doses of test preparation, no student is free from the curricular changes that have ubiquitously occurred as a result of this high-stakes standards-based accountability system. Because teachers are only accountable for test scores in math and reading, things like art, civics, health, physical education, and general enrichment activities are increasingly neglected.³⁹ Hursh writes, “Because of the pressure to raise test scores...teachers are compelled to teach the skills and knowledge that will be tested, neglecting more complex aspects of the subject and, indeed, some subjects altogether” (Hursh 506). One can imagine how dire it is to lose enrichment activities in bilingual schools. Even the highest-performing students, the students who are really great at taking tests, lose.

Ravitch plainly states that “we do not have measures” for “the most important dimensions of education” (Ravitch 166). Could it really be the case that the tests that have been central in determining the fate of so many schools, students, and teachers don’t even measure “the most important dimensions of education?”

This heavy emphasis on testing and accountability—the risks posed to schools should they fail to deliver high test scores—along with the difficulty in creating adequate tests in the sciences and humanities, has caused a narrowing of curriculum, part of what is commonly known as “teaching to the test.”⁴⁰ Robert Glaser and his team from the National Academy of Education

³⁹ For more on how standardized tests determine course content, see Rothstein, *Grading Education*, 45-52.

⁴⁰ For more on how schools tend to concentrate their attention on the subjects tested and on the grades that have high stakes tests, see Ladd and Zelli, 2002; Stecher et al., 2000. For more on how teachers narrow their curricula and shift focus to tested subjects, see Hamilton et al., 2005;

commented on the NAEP (national test) have written that “when test results become the arbiter of future choices, a subtle shift occurs in which *fallible and partial indicators of academic achievement are transformed into major goals of schooling*” (qtd. in Ravitch 167, my emphasis). “Unfortunately, we are apt to measure what we can, and eventually *come to value what is measured over what is left unmeasured*” (Glaser et al, qtd. in Ravitch 167). So by testing for certain things in certain ways, i.e. multiple choice tests on math and reading, the goals of education change from whatever they might have been to something very concrete: a score on a multiple choice math and/or reading test. Glaser and his team lament, “Those personal qualities that we hold dear—resilience and courage in the face of stress, a sense of craft in our work, a commitment to justice and caring in our social relationships, a dedication to advancing the public good in our communal life—are exceedingly difficult to assess” (qtd. in Ravitch 167). The difficulty is that “Some subjects are simply more challenging to assess than are others,” and that those that are easy to assess have been given extreme priority while subjects or skills, like art, civics, and health, that are more difficult to assess, are quickly heading toward extinction (Figlio and Loeb 390).⁴¹

This forces us to consider how an education designed to produce adequate scores on often mediocre tests might differ from an education designed to help students become strong critical thinkers and communicators who can make important contributions to democratic society.⁴² What are the goals of education, after all?

Koretz and Hamilton, 2003; Stecher et al., 1998; and Stecher et al., 2000. For more on how schools concentrate their energies on the most easily-improved instructional areas, see Chakrabarti, 2000.

⁴¹ Figlio and Loeb argue that “Such a pattern of behavior could lead to attention redirected from the desired, but difficult to measure, knowledge and skills in favor of the less desirable, but easier to measure, aspects of a subject” (390).

⁴² Freire’s concept of the “banking system” vs. dialogue-centered education is applicable here.

In a YouTube video made by the New York Civil Liberties Union, Donna Lieberman, executive director, remarks regarding teachers cheating to raise test scores that “When everything that goes into education is boiled down into a single, imperfect test score, are we really surprised that it sets up inducements for educators to abandon their best professional instincts and ethics as we have seen in too many cases?... We believe that New York shouldn’t use high stakes standardized tests, tests designed to assess student knowledge as a blunt one size fits all instrument that creates collateral harm to the most vulnerable students, to their teachers, and to their schools.”⁴³

Monday, February 25, 2013

7:20 a.m.

Waiting for students to arrive. Today I will be giving them a complete practice ACT Reading Test. That’s four sections in 35 minutes.

I took the practice and only got 31/40. That equals only a 28. It was a hard test!

Tuesday, February 26, 2013

Met with Sandra Boyer this morning about the MSA-Virtual. She gave me a pack of ground deer meat, which I later served to Sarah’s family while they were under the impression that it was beef. As we drove home Sarah and I had blurred vision. Joke’s on us: I’ve never wanted to be vegan so badly.

Sandra explained to me today that one motive behind making Satsuma Elementary a “school of choice” is to reduce the population of Broussard Elementary. I should have guessed this, since the administration at Broussard Elementary already conveyed to me that overpopulation was the biggest problem contributing to the school’s low performance and

⁴³ See YouTube video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5glj7WtPpA8>

negative atmosphere. Creating a magnet elementary at Satsuma school will reduce IE's population. OK, now I get it. So the point, yes, is to connect students to their cultures, to create an atmosphere that is passionate about learning. But also, a school of choice means some of the students zoned at Broussard Elementary will be able to go to elementary school elsewhere—and not just charter schools or private schools but to a public, high quality magnet school.

Sandra told me that she thinks the district should use virtual courses in Spanish to replace teachers in the district's very small schools like Wake Field and East Broussard. She says that doing this could save the district like \$40,000 and more than pay for EdGenuity.

Afterwards I met with Sue in her office and talked about last week's meetings with the virtual schools and expressed my newly confirmed opinion that all this change that's going on in Broussard is good. That Arceneaux seems to be a champion of public schools who's not afraid to use a more corporate type model to improve the district. Others who use more corporate type models are often sucking money away from public schools, but not him. Sue doesn't agree or disagree.

Wednesday, February 27, 2013

As Arceneaux and I walk out of the cinder block school board building towards his Acura, he tells me he thought of a name for the magnet elementary school. "I made it up this morning," he says. "The Atchafalaya Basin Academy. What you think?"

We drive along the bayou to Satsuma Elementary, where we enter a conference room and sit at a group of foldout tables pushed together with about eight other people, several of whom I've never seen. I take out my notepad.

Dr. Arceneaux explains to the group that he wants to create a themed program in which students can “live and breathe” their humanities curriculum. He suggests "theming" the humanities curriculum around the cultural and social history of the Atchafalaya Basin. Arceneaux, Ms. Christie, and Jeff Morris, the school’s guidance counselor (a tall wiry man with a comb over and a mustache), negotiate entrance requirements. Jeff Morris worked from a printed outline he had prepared with Ms. Christie about the restrictions they wanted to place on who would be able to attend the magnet school. They agreed that incoming students will have to be proven “proficient” in ELA using appropriate tests (Dibbles for younger kids). There will be a three-strikes-and-you’re-out policy for student behavior, but “major offenses,” as described in the current Satsuma handbook, would result in immediate expulsion. No students who have ever had discipline referrals will be admitted. And students must maintain a GPA of 2.5 to remain at the school.

And no name change.

I’m wondering, With these entrance requirements, who are they seeking to protect themselves from? I hear the term “Bad kids.” But who are the bad kids, I wonder? Why are they bad? Are they really *bad*? Is rejection what they need? Do we need to care about them?

“Teachers get fired, Ms. Christie says, if their students aren’t proficient three years in a row.” Is this unequivocally true? Is that the “accountability” Arceneaux refers to when he says to me as we leave the meeting, “We’re using a more corporate model: You see, sir?”

Kids who don’t do well on tests will put these people’s jobs at risk. But is that the only reason they so adamantly defend themselves against more complex, challenging kids? And who am I to judge these administrators after the fact, from my desk across the River?

After Ms. Christie and Jeff Morris make their demands, and they come to agreements, Arceneaux sits reflectively and all of a sudden jumps up from his chair and starts pacing towards the woman who administers the lottery process for the district and Ms. Christie. Either it's genuine or he's simply performing—I really can't tell—but it seems that a deep and profound delight has been triggered. He taps Maggie, who works at the central office, on the shoulder and raises his voice a few decibels, “You see what they're DOIN? Their SLS is gonna beat the Academy! This is *fascinating!*” And he sits back down and reclines in his chair at the conference table. Dr. Arceneaux is a frequently delighted man, and that makes him fun to be around.

Ms. Christie glances at her Satsuma Elementary constituents, as if about to present something they had agreed upon just prior to this meeting, “We're about excellence and pride. We want to send good products to the high school.”

The group acknowledges that one “risk” that should be considered is that the community and other elementary schools may complain that all the “good kids” are being taken away. However, everyone seems confident that the new magnet school will become very popular and that most parents and children will want to be part of it.

Mention was made of additional elementary schools of choice in the future. In that context, it's important to understand that the conversion of Satsuma Elementary will be a pilot for a transition to schools of choice throughout the district.

The difference between MSA-West and the new magnet school is that MSA is a magnet *program*, which means that its students' test scores are count for the students' zone schools. Satsuma, on the other hand, will keep its new students' test scores. This may help Ms. Christie bring Satsuma from a “B school” to an “A school.”

It is explained that I (Tom) will present the plan for the conversion of Satsuma Elementary to a magnet school to the school board on March 11th. The group looks at me encouragingly. I try to look confident. The school board will vote at the April meeting.⁴⁴

As we conclude the meeting, Dr. Arceneaux claps and announces to the group, “Choice is here, people. *Charter* is here. We need to compete!”

It felt pretty cool to be leaving the meeting with the superintendent, getting into his car, as he explained to me that he was trying to improve the district by using a corporate model. I’m being made to feel like his “right hand man,” and, I have to say, I like it. Of course, I wish I could tell my dad about this.

On the way back to the central office, Arceneaux and I discussed my contract. He asked what I envisioned the \$15,000 covering, and I said, well, I assumed that would pay me for the proposals for MSA Virtual and Satsuma. It became apparent that in talks with his people, they had tentatively decided that the 15,000 would, in fact, pay for 4 proposals: Two magnet schools this year and two next year. Finally, I said that I was flexible and reasonable that we could renegotiate the price next year, but maybe the \$15,000 could pay for the two contracts. Somehow, that worked. I’m getting paid \$7,500 per contract. That’s a lot. But I can’t feel bad. I mean, I have a family. I don’t have insurance on my car, it needs a \$1,200 repair, and it hasn’t even been inspected. I need a tooth cleaning. We need the money. (Plus it will allow me to go to the cabin this summer to write.)

⁴⁴ So that’s my purpose. Listed as a consultant but really getting fed this information and being the organ for the implementation of the plan. This must be protocol. Bring someone with *some* kind of credentials (“Mr. Sowders is an excellent writer,” he said to people in front of me several times. I never once flinched, just kind of agreed. I’m their man; just lost my father.)

Back at the office, I meet with Melanie, who phones the district CFO after talking to Arceneaux. A contract is printed. On the contract, I'm listed as a "consultant." So I guess I really am an active education consultant. My only thought: I need to do a REALLY good job on these presentations March 11th. I need to be somewhere approaching worth \$15,000!

Digression: Blake's Symbology

"Los"

But the Spectre is wrong. The Spectre has been with Los throughout the poem, "Hungring & thirsting for Los's life yet pretending obedience," thinking that Los was unaware of the Spectre's intentions (218). But Los always has a critical consciousness of his own nature. He is truly educated in that way. Los has directed the energy of the Spectre into his work: He has invited and drawn from the resources of ambition, jealousy, anger, resentment, and known that these forces are in direct philosophical conflict with Jerusalem, but the fact that he KNEW he was compelling these negative forces into a the productive labor of education justifies his use of them. The implication is that the Selfhood is easily tricked. Los cries to his Spectre:

But mark
I will compel thee to assist me in my terrible labours. To beat
These hypocritic Selfhoods on the Anvils of bitter Death.
I am inspired! I act not for myself: for Albion's sake
I now am what I am! a horror and an astonishment
Shuddering the heavens to look upon me...' (217)

Los's labors are "terrible" in part because they are "hypocritic." Clearly, Blake/Los is making reference to Blake's method of plate making, which involved intense labor and concentration—precisely hammering the shapes of his images and backwards script. Hypocritical because the message Blake offers suggests that transcending the self for an awareness of the interconnectedness of all minute particulars, yet Blake takes great pride in his art objects and considers himself a genius. Los's mission allows him to transcend even this contradiction: He's

“inspired,” and his labor will benefit all of Albion, all those who are not himself. The capacity and willingness to think about the good of others evinced when Los says he labors for all of Albion, is the same capacity for considering other perspectives referred to by the concept of mutual forgiveness. He calls attention to his pride and ambition with the phrase “I now am what I am,” which, of course, overtly invokes the Biblical naming of God. In a sense, by sort of calling himself God, he is showing how channeling ambition, pride, and selfhood, although it makes him a hypocrite and a “horror,” is what makes it possible for him to “act” for Albion. Taking reflective, liberating action is the epitome of human potential. Thus, Blake shows how to channel the Spectre into liberating education.⁴⁵

March

Saturday, March 3, 2013

Hard to sleep. I’m camped out in the living room with Leo because it’s cold out. The gas heater glows on the wall and baby murmurs and car doors slam out in the street. The Xbox whirs for white noise. Someone comes in the front door of the apartment house five feet from my head, a sneaker skirts on the wooden stairs, and clomps to the upstairs apartment. Now s/he walks in the direction of their kitchen—I can hear every step clearly.

Today I’ve been working on my Prezis on Satsuma and MSA-Virtual for the school board meeting next Monday. Coming along but my sense of the big picture needs focus and streamlining. I’ve never been to a school board meeting so I have no idea what it will be like or to whom I’ll be presenting. Maybe I could research that. Just did. Looks like a bunch of interesting characters. They look discerning, exacting, judicious, annoying, kind of dumb.

⁴⁵ One can really see how someone like Bobby Jindal, Bill Gates, Michelle Rhee, Geoffrey Canada, think of themselves as Los-type figures. Trying to imagine their way to explode the shackles of what they consider Ulroic teacher union laws.

“To be a model school district.” The “transformation of our school district.” These words come from the page brought up by the link “School Board” on the Broussard Parish Schools website.

I need to hit this thing out of the park. This will undoubtedly impact my future. That’s what Dad would say. He would have advice. Maybe I should contact cousins Ken and Jamie? Maybe I could start a business with those two cousins. A virtual private school.

Digression: Future Praxis/Private Virtual School

Hire PHDs at competitive pay: get OUTSTANDING faculty. Give them sabbaticals and support scholarly activity in the field. Publication encouraged.

Initially train the faculty in EdGenuity (or other) courseware. Over time we will develop our own lesson videos and courseware. A huge part of the hiring process for faculty has been example lessons. Video production will be a huge part of the job.

What can we offer? Superior staff. College coaching. Urban Agriculture. Accelerated.

- Service Learning – Blakean. Learn by applying knowledge. We research, for example, the correlation between certain groups of people and college attendance rates. Or rate of heart disease. We intervene with praxis. Through this, we build lessons to introduce and enrich material to be tested by the state.
 - Urban Agriculture. How could we get kids to do this at home? Send them materials in the mail.
- College Coaching
 - Someone like a counselor with experience as a life coach or admissions coach. Design plans for students that include community service projects, internships, grant proposals. Identifies strengths and interests. Works with teaching team.

- Need some consultation here from coaches or hire someone.
- Do private schools have to adhere to Common Core standards?
- Electives! Virtual program makes available classes like welding, any P.E. class, Game Design, Computer Coding, Furniture making, things you can do at home. Cool stuff that would set you apart from other college applicants. This school shows you are responsible and savvy in the modern world.
- We make a promise (not a contract) that your kids will get into college.
- Go at your own pace: Accelerated Graduation. Credit recovery if necessary. No being held back a year.
- Space
 - A physical space (large and outside of town): Progress Learning Center
 - A small video studio. Learning Labs. Agriculture.
 - Faculty in cubicles or more comfortable spaces.
 - Phones, communication, technology.
 - Market over XBOX live, online, message boards.

Sunday, March 4, 2013

Ugh! First morning of a juice fast. This concoction tastes like rotten bananas and some kind of venom. I can't imagine anything better than a McDonald's cheeseburger.

Backed into a parked car on the way out this morning, forgot my wallet and the gas light was on, Sarah had to come give me my wallet, arrive at MSA and the copier was jammed, used other copier and was late to first hour, only one student didn't leave. Then a new influx of seniors who have no apparent stake in ACT performance came to second hour.

Digression: On “School Choice”

In recent years, many mainstream documentary and fiction films have taken up the issue of school choice. Documentaries like *Waiting for Superman* and *Lottery* and the fiction film *Won't Back Down* portray urban public schools as dangerous, overcrowded, bureaucratic institutions full of lazy, incompetent teachers whose union affiliations represent a road block on the path to better education. Because the schools we see in these films are so bad and so incapable of rapid improvement (teachers can't be fired; policy changes take too long), the parents we meet are extremely frustrated and pursue school options other than the neighborhood schools for their children. The emotional center of all three films is the lottery process—the process by which charter schools like Kipp or the Promise Academy admit students into their progressive but small schools.⁴⁶ Because, as we watch the movies, we align emotionally with the particular children we meet, we find ourselves hoping that things will work out, and that the students will be able to escape the dangerous culture of the failing schools. We begin to think about what we would do if it were OUR children in these situations, and we realize that for OUR kids, recalling the fervor of the parents in the films, only an immediate solution would be acceptable. It becomes very easy to say that school choice is good. Parents and children should be able to choose what school they go to.

Given some emotional distance from the issue, we can see that at the same time that NCLB is crippling schools through economic sanctions and narrowed curricula, it has laid the groundwork for a network of options for students to escape from their struggling neighborhood schools and, instead, attend charter schools, magnet schools, or private schools, actions that further divert economic resources from public schools, since their resources are based on student

⁴⁶ See films *Waiting for Superman*, *The Lottery*, and *Won't Back Down*.

population numbers. From this perspective, it seems that public education has been given constraints under which wide scale failure is inevitable—that it has been set on the path of failure. Meanwhile, choice, a second major aspect of the NCLB Act, allows parents to pull their children out of failing schools and send them to schools that receive partial or full financial support from private entities.

The thing that seems to divide those who support school choice and those that oppose it is therefore an issue of immediacy and perspective. People who support choice want kids to immediately have improved circumstances. There might be larger reasons why their neighborhood schools are suffering, and they might even keep themselves informed and active in an effort to strengthen their neighborhood schools. But the fact remains that parents will always put the welfare of their children above anything else. If a parent feels that he can provide his child with a better education, or better opportunities, or a safer environment, by sending his child to a charter school, then he will almost always do so, if he is able. Opponents of school choice think that escape doesn't necessarily ensure improved conditions or learning but does weaken the larger school system. They see education as a right, as something fundamental to American democracy and not a product to be purchased from a for-profit entity.

Monday, March 11, 2013

Tonight is my school board presentation. In three hours, I have to meet with the superintendent at his office to give him an idea of how my presentation is going to look. I'm more nervous about this than I am about the real presentation, but so be it. I can't be nervous, so I'll be confident. My best tie.

I'm not sure how effective I have been as an ACT trainer. At the buzzer here, too late, I want to revise some of the things I've said to students. Like the way I've suggested dividing time. I said 12, 10, 8, 5 but now I'm more in the camp of 12, 12, 10, 1.⁴⁷ I want to emphasize that students need to return to the passages in order to answer the questions, but I also just want to get out of here. I'm not really feeling it today, especially with the school board meeting tonight. But, that's just how I feel right now. I'm sure that things will get rolling once the students arrive. I guess next week I'll get back into the Blended Learning thing.

A conversation with Roger Wyn complicated my thoughts about serving this role in the district. He is concerned that flipping classrooms is just an excuse to fire teachers.

Monday, March 12, 2013

March School Board Meeting

I arrived in the best I could put together. A power tie bought for me by my dad at Jos. A. Bank—a power tie of gold and navy diagonal stripes, not without some sheen—and a thrift store blazer. I had watched videos online of Broussard Parish school board meetings from years past, so I knew that there would be a moment of silence and then a Pledge of Allegiance. I watched Sarah as she put her hand on her heart.

There's no smell in the room, although it looks like it should be kind of musky. Old hard carpet, foam ceiling. People fill the metal fold-out chairs on the floor, and the board members take their seats.

⁴⁷ These numbers represent minutes spent on each of the four passages of the Reading Comprehension section of the ACT. Students have been instructed to quickly put the passages in order and then spend more time on the first ones than the last.

The meeting starts with happy announcements. MSA-West has again been named a national magnet school of excellence, and Sandra accepts a plaque or certificate or something. Another announcement: A middle school student at MSA-West has been elected governor in a multi-school mock election. Dr. Arceneaux from his seat on the board, “Is it ‘Gay-ham?’”

The slight kid from the podium: “It’s ‘Ga’am.’”

“Oh, alright, well mista Gam is going to read us his speech” and Mr. Gayham begins reading his speech, from which we quickly learn that he has been through five foster homes, that he knows what it’s like to be afraid at school, that he used to go to the worst kind of school and now he goes to the “best.” MSA-West. You can feel the tears welling in the room. Sarah dabs her eye. In his speech, the young man calls on the mock legislature to raise income tax by a half percent to increase salaries for firefighters and teachers. He also calls for mandatory drug testing for all public school students. The adults in the room mmhmm agreement with his hypothetical policy.

I suddenly feel a strange and inappropriate feeling of competition with this boy. I think “I’m not going to be able to follow that” and that he has somehow defeated me before I’ve had a chance to retaliate. I don’t come from foster homes. I come from the World’s Best Childhood, which included private school, skiing out west in the winter, and a convertible BMW for my first car.

It’s almost like a self-fulfilling prophecy. I tell myself not to get nervous and then I feel the flood of adrenaline and the pounding, humming heart. The blood feels oxidized in my veins, my feet feel light. It’s happening in a wave. But I think, Jesus I’m thirty-two years old. Treat it like a class, treat it like a class. I’m bright enough for this. And by the time I emerge from my blocked-in position in the rear corner and walk to the podium, I’m fine.

I explain the proposal to convert Satsuma Elementary into a magnet school using a visually compelling Prezi template. Part of the idea is to “wow” them with technology they’ve never seen, which means to silence them. Melanie has suggested, and I have very much agreed, that some of the information about requirements for the new “Academy” (the 2.5 GPA, the proficiency, the maximum number of students, etc) would be better spoken aloud than printed on the screen. I’ve agreed because I don’t particularly want to be scrutinized and debated since I feel inadequate to answer specific questions about these things because multiple points of view have informed this presentation, and not everyone has communicated with me (or each other) in the clearest manner. And, of course, I’ve been made to understand that the bottom line for Dr. Arceneaux and Melanie is that the plans to get approved with the least amount of hang-ups and noise. They seem fairly certain it will pass, so to them harassment is unnecessary and nettlesome.

When I’m done with the Prezi and the lights come up, a nice-looking woman of color sitting on the end of the board gets the go ahead from the president to ask a question. “How many proposals like this have you done?”

She’s looking at me. Probably in her sixties. She looks pleasant. “None,” I say, but there’s some commotion on the other side of the board, where Arceneaux is sitting.

“I’m sorry, you say none?”

“That’s correct, I’ve never written a proposal for a *school* before.”

“So you’re just getting your feet wet.”

I’m losing control. I smile. “That’s correct, but I’m working with a team of experts.” I mean the note of encouragement to be charming. I fail in this regard.

“*Experts? Who?*”

As I start to answer, I'm relieved that she interrupts me to ask the superintendent—the commotion over there has died down now—how much money I'm being paid.

Dr. Arceneaux's face flushes, "How much *money*, my gosh..." And he tells her than I'm being paid \$13,000 local money through the partnership with LSU, and from grant money: another fifteen thousand.

She makes a face like she tasted something long-rotten. She turns her attention back to me. "But you're not writing your *thesis* on this?" I use a question mark, but this isn't a question.

I think to myself, *She knows. People have been talking about how much I'm being paid, how I'm young (and white), and how I'm writing my dissertation on this. Double-dipping. Privileged. People are talking about me. She came here planning to "get" me because of what I've been reduced to in her eyes. I've existed as whiteness, as overpaidness, as an abuser, a taker of advantages in the content of whispers.*

I remain stoic as my heart sinks. *I'm not a human being to her.* I want to turn around and look at Sarah to read her face, probably just to ensure that this is actually happening. I realize now that they—Arceneaux, Melanie, Sandra—knew something like this would happen and didn't want me to worry about it. But even as I feel the flash of anxiety (I lament not bringing the Xanax I'm prescribed for anxiety attacks), it occurs to me that *this is OK, even a good thing. I'm being challenged. I'll gain from this. I won't let this woman's inappropriate abuse affect the rest of my presentation.* I calm down, I hold my face with an open and innocent smile. I look from board member to board member, slowly and confidently.

"No, no, he's not writing his thesis on this," Arceneaux says as if it were a ridiculous suggestion.

Miraculously, she seems satisfied. I'm pretty sure Arceneaux's just straight up lying in order to get her to stop trying to intimidate or crucify or whatever she's trying to do to me. To expose me as inexperienced, double-dipping, parasitic. But I can't be sure because Arceneaux is the type that usually thinks while he listens, and on the few occasions that I've mentioned writing my dissertation about this experience, I can't be sure he was listening. But I'm pretty sure he was, and I'm pretty sure that the reason he gets called the best superintendent in the state is that he is always listening, even when it doesn't seem like he could be.

But today I'm thinking about the woman's position. The thing is, another board member, clearly sympathetic with my interrogator, makes the point that as a district, we should start taking measures to improve schools that have low standings now rather than focusing our efforts on the schools that are already doing well. I can't help but agree wholeheartedly. To say, yes! You are totally right! Excellent point: What the hell have we been thinking here?

So, is it ethical to start with Satsuma? Is this whole movement, the Satsuma program and the Virtual program, ethical? Who does it help? Who does it leave behind?

Check out this quote from Deborah Meier on school choice:

Choice is a necessary but not sufficient part of a far larger strategy. Creating smaller and more focused educational communities, enhancing the climate of trust between families and schools, developing workable models of self-governance, increasing the heterogeneity of a school's population, and using pedagogies that respond to diverse learning styles and student interests are all factors that current research suggests correlate with improved school outcomes. All of these are far easier to accomplish in small schools of choice, and it is possible that many of them can be accomplished only in such a setting. But choice itself will not produce a single one of them, except perhaps a temporarily greater sense of membership. It is a vehicle for allowing us to move ahead more efficiently, not a guarantee that we will do so. (103)

Monday, March 12, 2013, continued

March School Board Meeting

The next presentation I gave to the board was a Prezi I created to explain the plan for a new, virtual academy to occupy the space of the once failing, now-closed North Broussard High School. This is the hot-button issue, the reason for some of the trenches in Arceneaux's face. He closed the high school about four years ago because its test scores, graduation rates, and grade point averages were consistently low and because the cost of operating the school compared to the number of students was very high. After North Broussard High was closed, its zoned students were transferred to Plantation High School. The community was upset. Arceneaux was unpopular in that part of the parish. But, during a visit to the North Broussard space in late January, I talked to a custodian who had attended North Broussard and whose son was transferred from North to Plantation High in the year of North's closing. I asked her how it was to have her son transferred.

"It was fine." And she turned the lights on for me and the dim, haunted hall became a well-lighted ramshackle situation. I thought, *This carpet needs to be pulled up.*

So the superintendent has come up with a plan to restore the community's faith in him by "giving something back to North Broussard." During the meeting before the school board meeting I'm supposed to be describing, Arceneaux makes it clear that he wants it to be emphasized that this is something *for* the people of North Broussard.

And here I am, his instrument. Arceneaux is reclining way back in his chair, thumb and forefinger across his chin, assessing me as I begin my presentation. Here's what I'm telling them.

MSA-North is going to be a virtual school similar to virtual schools already in existence in Boyer Bridge and Lafayette. These schools allow students to take courses online using E2020 (EdGenuity) courseware. Kids can go to the school part-time, to do things like recover credits, accelerate their progress through school, take classes after work, take classes while ill or pregnant. The schools have facilitators who help with the courseware, proctor tests, and tutor students. This thing works out pretty well. Students learn and do well and like the program. Everybody involved loves the program.

So we are going to take the library and computer lab at North Broussard, give it a slight makeover, and turn it into a beautiful virtual magnet school: MSA Virtual. To “attend” full-time you have to maintain a 2.75 and not misbehave. No such standards for part-time students.

It’s a central hub. But part-time students will be able take tests and get tutoring (we hope) at their home schools. Full time students will take their tests and stuff at North.

Busses will take students from North to Plantation High if students want to participate in sports. If they want to “play in band or play athletics.”

Wednesday, March 13, 2013

Last day of ACT training at PHS. Today I want to have the students complete one relatively easy Prose Fiction passage to give them some further familiarity with the genre, since we never went over the genre specifically. It does occur to me that reading these narrative passages is a little different than the informational ones. I want it to be somewhat easy to boost their confidence, since they have been stuck underneath the score of 18 that they are desired to have by Matthew Parry.

I want to give them some last pointers today. Relax, use POE, engage the imagination while reading: Those are the main things. I suppose I will emphasize these things before giving them the passages to complete. Unfortunately, the copier needs toner, so I might have to give them the books and not let them underline or write marginalia even while insisting that marking up the test is so very important. In a few minutes, I'll go back down to the faculty lounge and see if the copier has been attended to yet.

This ACT training experience has been good insofar as I have learned some reasonably good tips, but because there was a learning curve, I was unable to give the best possible lessons to the students, and I'm of course unhappy about that. For example, at one point I thought it was a good idea for students to divide their time on the Reading Test passages thusly: 12, 10, 8, 5. After diagnostic practice tests, though, I realized that because so many students were hovering around the 15-18 score, it would probably make more sense for them to eliminate the fourth passage and work more slowly and deliberately on the first three. Also, I've been emphasizing that the most important criteria for determining how to order the passages are paragraph size and number of specific line references in the questions. After talking with students though, especially Davon, I realize that student interest in the topic is more important than I previously realized. These kids aren't the best readers. It's hard for them. And when it's on a boring topic, or one that doesn't interest them, it's a lot harder. So I'm wondering if I should use this last lesson to revise my previous suggestions (I've already suggested a 12, 12, 10, 1 time distribution).

I just realized that one of the students I like best, Jaylen Something, is from Bayou Teche, and would have gone to North Broussard High if Arceneaux hadn't closed it down. "It's messed up," he said. I asked what's messed up. "That they closed the school. I wanted to graduate from there." I asked if he'd heard of the virtual school that was going to go there. He said yeah. A

couple students have heard of it in the room. “I didn’t know it was true but now I do since you said it.” I told them that I designed it. Indulgence.

The youngish bald guy on the school board who stood up for me when I was under attack stopped by the room to pull me aside and say how much the school board appreciates what I’m doing, asking me not to think the school board doesn’t back me just because of the displeasure expressed by that one board member. Deb Harris also stopped by the classroom to say that I did an excellent job and not to worry—“We have your back.” Feels good.

Matthew comes on the intercom very upset: “I have a seventeen hundred dollar lunch bill.....You cannot charge your meals, lunch or dinner.....I can’t afford a seventeen hundred dollar lunch bill.....I didn’t eat the food: You did....” All these interruptions from the intercom make teaching here a nerve-wracking experience, and that, along with the never-ending pressure to perform on standardized tests only confirms my conviction that the best place for me is outside the public school system. I really like Sue’s idea about offering scholarships to kids who otherwise wouldn’t be able to afford tuition.

Ricky Aro just can’t get started reading. He puts his head down on the desk. He looks around. He sighs. JUST START! I want to yell. I want to go football coach and express anger and frustration. DO IT! READ! But I don’t. Instead, I tell myself that I can only do so much, that if they don’t care, they don’t care. I can’t make them care. In this regard, I am a failure. I am certain that my presence in these kids’ lives will make absolutely no difference in their ACT scores. I can only hope for luck that the tests are somehow easy and the kids do well and I get some of the credit. I don’t think it works simply. I think that to improve scores of the ACT you have to start with young kids and teach them to read a lot over the course of their childhoods. These kids just NEVER read. They’re not good at it. They just aren’t. They don’t like it.

Thursday, March 14, 2013

Diane Ravitch Visits Red Stick

Yesterday, I heard on the local NPR station that Diane Ravitch was coming to talk to the public today in Baton Rouge. I went to check it out.

I walk into the auditorium, and a man comes into view as he greets the three women in the first two rows of seats. He asks for their help handing out fliers, and while he's working a small stack off a larger stack, he says to the lady, "I'm gonna ask that young man to help me, too." He breaks me off a little yellow stack. The flier is a homemade advertisement for the guy's blog. He apparently calls himself the Louisiana Educator. I hand the entire stack to the women at the door. I'm not feeling extroverted today. A large shiny faced man is enjoying a cookie in a suit.

Since getting here I've tucked my shirt in and untucked it again. I'm not sure who I am today. I just want to be a fly on the wall. But also I think to myself that I should ask Ravitch a question. "I've been hearing a lot of talk about virtual schools. Do you think there is ever a place that virtual schools can be good?" But I'm afraid I might get attacked if I bring something like that up. I'm feeling kind of like the enemy, even though I probably agree with most of what's being felt strongly around here. A woman who calls herself a "young lawyer" hands out buttons. I get handed one and put it on. "Learning is more than a test score," it says. OK, I can get behind that. (I still want to start a private virtual school, though. I still am down with charter schools. I am still not "one" of these.)

I mean, I'm not just going to walk around handing advertisements for some dude's blog just because he asks me to. I don't know what's on the blog. Plus, and more truthfully, I don't like the way he just expected me to do it. If he would have said, Hey, I write this blog, and these

are the things I espouse, I could really use the help, if you would be willing,” then I MIGHT have considered handing out his handbills to people in the room. This is a sign, by the way. To turn on NPR the day I’ve returned to the Ravitch book to hear she’ll be in town the next afternoon? The Forces wanted me here. Blake and my Dad wanted me to come here. I hope I understand why at the appropriate moment.

“Sloganizing” and “depositing...cannot be components of revolutionary praxis, precisely because they are components of the praxis of domination” (Freire 121). I think Ravitch falls into this pitfall. She’s not revolutionary. She shows up, gives a one-direction speech, moving from slogan to slogan, selling her book. She doesn’t show up and start asking questions. She comes in and says Hey I’m Diane Ravitch, I’m a leader of this “revolution,” I worked for George Bush and a bunch of other douche bags, I’m gonna tell it like it is. Illusion of revolution. “In order to dominate, the dominator has no choice but to deny true praxis to the people, deny them the right to say their own word and think their own thoughts” (Freire 121). It would obviously be a stretch to call Diane Ravitch a true dominator but this can help us see that she’s no revolutionary. She’s part of the structure, masquerading as a revolutionary. She’s a politician with her own Spectre.

Friday, March 15, 2013

This floating dreamscape of a progressive virtual school. How does the space change as I am exposed to more thoughts on education and education reform?

When I told Sue about the newest evolution of my idea (Before, it was a charter school—now it’s both private (to avoid testing requirements) and virtual (to make it feasible in financial terms)), she was calm. Her first question was, “Well, will there be scholarships?” *Scholarships!* I think. *Of course.* That fills in an important missing gap in the business plan: ethics. Why do ethics matter? Because feeling like I’m doing something good for people eliminates a certain

kind of deep stress at my core. Without that stress, I'm a happier person, and I'm a better person to the people I live with. In this way, I am completely self-interested. I am the selfhood. The specter calls me even now to the couch. To the Burger King. Today is the latest of a few days during which I feel a terrible stress in my head. I'm so focused on my body and on my future, I can't enjoy the present moment. Anyway, I'm also OK. Just want to feel good enough to be a little nicer. Sue is always looking out for the kids who are inherently excluded from the privatization of education. By "choice." Because kids always are being left behind in any private departure from public school. In the Satsuma Academy plan, only very few kids will be eligible for entry. Essentially, this program will allow a handful of top-performing students to escape Broussard Elementary. This will cause the school's score to fall even further. This absolutely cannot be good for Broussard Elementary unless you're really optimistic enough to say that any drop in school population is a good thing. They become what they behold. That's why they want to take the top students (They already separated the first grade from the rest of the school) from Broussard Elementary, so they won't become low performing, not-caring, anti-intellectual people. Conversely, that's why it's dangerous to take potential role models away.

The more "schools of choice" they offer in Broussard Parish, the more "good students" will be carted off from Broussard Elementary, leaving it more and more behind. The students at Broussard will begin to identify themselves as students at the "bad school."

Digression: On "School Choice"

People may commonly think that school choice is a new concept, but it absolutely isn't. Compulsory attendance at schools began in the mid-nineteenth century. Before then, parents were free to educate their children at home, at their church, or in a community-run school. Compulsory attendance at school came about, as Nasaw explains, largely because of the efforts

of reformers who saw children in the streets during the day as a threat to private property and social peace. School choice as we know it now is commonly believed to have originated as a reaction to the desegregation of public schools that resulted from *Brown vs. The Board of Education*. Exactly like parents who could afford private schools did so to avoid placing their kids into schools half-full of the children of Irish immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century, many parents of the twentieth and the twenty-first century desire to place their kids in excellent schools full of children from prosperous families (Nasaw 72). Many times this has boiled down to white parents sending their white children to mostly white private schools in order to not send them to mostly black public schools, and this may explain why every single white friend I've met in South Louisiana attended a parochial school. This was shocking.

The American Federation for Children is a large organization that promotes school choice, specifically voucher programs and scholarship tax credit programs. They explain their rationale for supporting school choice: "Every child deserves a high-quality education. But across the country, many children are trapped in failing schools. Too often, low-income and lower middle-income children are forced to attend schools that simply don't work. These children deserve *immediate* options."⁴⁸ Their stated mission is to work to change laws so that low-income children who are "trapped in failing schools" can have access to better schools. The AFC positions itself against teachers unions, especially the Louisiana Association of Educators, who, according to the AFC Web site, sent the AFC a letter threatening to sue any private school that received public funding.

⁴⁸ See website: <http://www.federationforchildren.org/mission>

Bill Gates is also a proponent of school choice and refers to failing schools as “dropout factories.”⁴⁹ On vouchers, Gates has positive feelings but thinks it would be hard to change minds about the negative impacts: “And honestly, if we thought there would be broad acceptance in some locales and long-term commitment to do them, they have some very positive characteristics.” Gates, through his foundation, has donated hundreds of millions of dollars opening small schools in different cities and paying for research. He believes that education, like technology and pharmaceuticals, would benefit by large investment in research. Because, as he states, teachers are the biggest factors deciding whether or not students will be successful (on standardized tests), research should help us solve the mystery of what makes a great teacher. This belief that teachers are the most important factor in determining the odds of a student’s success also put Gates, along with most school choice supporters, in conflict with teachers unions. He believes in paying teachers according to their performance, a market-style technique that opposes one of the flagship requirements set by teachers unions.

Proponents of school choice point out bad teachers as a major contributing factor in the “failure” of public schools. They then villainize union officials for representing the rigid system that prevents children access to excellent teachers, for guarding the status quo. How bad of a problem are bad teachers? I hear it mentioned in Broussard quite a bit, by teachers and school board employees.

⁴⁹ See Riley, Jason L. “Was the \$5 Billion Worth It? A decade into his record-breaking education philanthropy, Bill Gates talks teachers, charters—and regrets.” *Wall Street Journal* July 23, 2011.

Digression: An Interview with Bethany Field

I ask Bethany Field, who operates the Louisiana Connections Academy, owned by Pearson, for an interview, and she cheerily agrees via email. I show up at the appointed time. Bethany leads me to her office, and we sit down and get to business.

I ask what education reform means to her, and she says, “To me education reform is directly linked to the fact that we’re educating at 100 miles an hour and we’ve just completely lost track of what we should be educating, so we’ve wasted a lot of time. So reform has to directly go back to making people employable. The classes that kids take have to relate back to something that they can use post-graduation.

“Your typical junior high/high school student is still taking classes and being taught in a way that will not benefit them in a career. They’re not taught problem solving skills, communication skills. They’re learning about Shakespeare, which is fantastic, but what if your ambition is to become a master mechanic? You know, perhaps what they need to be learning is how to read material that will help them do a much better job at doing that. For example, cyber security is a big deal right now...so when I think of education reform, I’m thinking of somebody being aware of what’s happening globally, what’s happening politically and saying we have a problem because we have so few students who are graduating with the ability to be in this career field. Our schools need to be reformed around the career needs and skilled workforce needs in this country.

“And reform also means being able to expose kids sooner to that material. So that in Louisiana we have seat time waivers and they’re even thinking about, Why make you take Algebra I when I can put you in a Algebra II class and—you know what, Tom?—if you pass Algebra II, I’m gonna go ahead and give you credit for Algebra I. Let’s move you along a little

bit faster so we can get you into these computer programming classes. So, you know, it's about responding to your environment: That's education reform."

I ask what she sees as the benefits of virtual education.

"As soon as Johnny has a problem I can fix within minutes with keystrokes. I don't have to wait to find out that Johnny has a problem. I don't have to take it to committee. I don't have to be overwhelmed with all the other Johnnies that are out there. Online education allows you to really respond much faster to what's happening with a student, on either spectrum, either that you need to slow down for that student, that you need to give them another opportunity to master the material, or that you've got a real sharp cookie on your hands where you're already starting to think that Johnny needs to be dually enrolled by the second semester of his sophomore year, let's get to it. So that's what that offers. You know, we just started offering the Juilliard Music Program that was vetted and designed and constructed with *the* Juilliard. Now what student in very rural Louisiana could have access to that program? What musically gifted child can go to the Juilliard and have a Juilliard experience? So, the virtual world allows a Louisiana student horizons and access to expand phenomenally, so that's what we're bringing to the table."

I ask her how she would respond to people who say that virtual schools inhibit the social development of children.

"Our students are usually done much sooner than their counterparts that get off the bus at 3:30/4 o'clock in the afternoon and then have to do homework. So my students actually have more time to socialize, which means that they find opportunities to socialize. They're either in Drama or they're in Athletics or they're musicians, and you know, your need to hang out with your buddies doesn't go away just because you're with an online school. If anything, they have

to wait around for *those* kids to get off the bus, finish their homework, before they can get together. So, that's the go-to argument when you have no other argument. That's my response to that."

I tell her that the educational historian Diane Ravitch thinks virtual charters schools represent the death of American public education. I ask her what she thinks about that.

"It's fear that you're hearing. You know, I'm an educational historian too just by virtue of my age. And I've learned even with that type of woman to just pause and understand that that is pure fear you're hearing. And it's important to hear that fear, and the best approach with those people and those arguments is to...if you ever could get into a conversation with her: 'I just hear a lot of fear here. What are you really concerned about because that's not really reality?' And get *that* dialogue going. Fear of change and fear of young people. The average age of educators in this country is like 25. So you've got a slew of people who are really feeling the pressure because there's this young group of amazing leaders coming up that are under the age of 40, and so they're overreacting to that. And you know I'm excited about it because I think it's going to take the next generation to fix and to move this reform forward. I mean thank God John White is as young as he is because he's not going to be in the head like this one is." [I don't know what this means.]

I tell her about my idea for a virtual private school. Then I ask her if standardized testing bothers her.

"No, I am honored to test my kids. Honored by it, and I'm going to tell you why. Because if you really love education, and you love educators, you love your brick and mortar colleagues; you love your other virtual colleagues. And to be part of this same accountability system: that was one of the reasons that we chose here at LACA to participate in the Compass System for

teachers so they would have a VAM score and have to go through that evaluation. It makes you part of a family of educators who are going through the same journey and being held accountable. If you wanted to remain private, I would at least have processes in place where you could communicate to a parent or to the public, ‘Look we don’t do Leap testing but we use the California Achievement Test; we rely heavily on NATE testing; we participate because we *do* want to be held accountable, but we’re actually choosing a more rigorous test.’ So, you are just part of that collective group working towards accountability. Accountability is not bad. If the tests were great, none of us would have a problem with it. And I do think that the Common Core and the PARC standards are wonderful. So, it’s not a dirty word. I think AYP drove people crazy. And with the new waivers that’s really adjusted itself, and then you have these safe harbor rules that kind of get you out of it. So I think there’s been recognition that there were problems in the system, but the only thing that puts on the brakes as far as virtual education with people who want to slam it is when I say, ‘Well, we *do* do state testing. My teachers *get* a VAM score. They may *lose* their certification.’ That just shuts people up right there and then.”

I ask her what she would change about her virtual school if she could.

“Blended. See I’m full time [virtual]. That doesn’t work for every kid. Some kids really do need to have contact with a teacher.” She tells me that she and her team contacted the state department and asked if they could have a blended component. She says she wishes she could have a tutoring center. But it would be a laborious process to go from full virtual to blended because the school was started (and approved) as full-time virtual. “But that, to me, is what’s missing. I think any full-time online school will start to devolve. I think now online schools should all have a blended component or a blended opportunity for their students.

“So that you could have students who have access to their core teachers on a structured basis where they can just say I don’t get this sloping stuff, it’s driving me crazy. And that they are with other students—small groups—OK let’s figure out this sloping. All right, you know, you love to spend time with kids face to face so you guys are also gonna do some project-based learning. And that’s incorporated, but you’re still allowing for an individualized curriculum, individualized pacing. Oh, you’re already done with Algebra I, and it’s been three months of school? OK, Algebra II, here we go. You get the best of both worlds. People have often, like on the radio, I get interviewed a lot on the radio because people are just curious about us, and they’re like ‘Do you think brick and mortar schools will ever go away?’ and I’m like ‘Gosh I hope not’ because then you’re removing people’s options. And I tell them that I do think there’s gonna be the best of both worlds. There will be a blending of these two environments. So that’s what I would change: If I could snap, I would do that.”

Digression: Blake’s Symbology

“Education”

In the prose introduction to the last chapter of the poem, “To the Christians,” Blake writes, “Let every Christian as much as in him lies engage himself openly & publicly before all the World in some Mental pursuit for the Building up of Jerusalem” (311). The mission is radical education. In *Jerusalem*, Blake offers instruction in how work towards a widespread social enlightenment that will result in a society of liberated individuals who understand their interconnectedness. This instruction gives names to fundamental human forces so that we can talk about them, gain a critical consciousness of them. But Blake also offers instruction in the kind of education that will help Albion exist in a state of becoming Jerusalem.

Los states his mission to the infected Albion, “I have innocence to defend and ignorance to instruct” (42.26). Blake’s suggestion is that the key to social liberation is education. And because Los symbolizes the inspired poet, we can infer that the kind of education required for revolution is not the dissemination of information but rather a participatory effort of creating knowledge through action based on communication. Although language or images cannot directly effect social change, they play a crucial role in a global *exchange* of ideas—ideas which result in successions of action, starting with the acts of reading and conversing, and culminating in rebellious but reasonable action based on mutual forgiveness and recognition of the fact that we are all connected.

Thursday, March 21, 2013

What has my father become since his death? What kind of eternal being has he become? I think a nod here to Joseph Roach would be in order. It’s not that I’m searching for a surrogate here, but something interesting has happened in a the-king-is-dead-long-live-the-king sort of manner. My dad is everywhere, and I’m still seeking his advice and approval. More so now than ever, actually. I think he would approve of me starting a charter school. I think he would be proud of that. Tentatively, though. Business-wise, it’s a risk. It could fail. And then what? (Try again: Fail better.)

You should understand that this is some serious shit. Real kids are really going to have really shitty or really hopeful futures based on who knows what and who DOES what with the central issues of education reform. When I say, “Who DOES what,” you’re understanding that this dissertation is about the possibility of ACTION inspired by other human beings—what they create, what they say, what they do. That’s what Blake means by Apocalypse. And that’s central to this dissertation. But this particular moment is supposed to be about me and how it feels to

actually be acting in the real world while doing this research. I say that “this is some serious shit” because I want you to know how intensely it feels to be spending days in Broussard Parish, making moves that will have a real impact on kids’ lives, as I learn about what the implications of these moves might be. Will what I’m doing screw kids up? Am I helping some larger, racist attempt to combat the desegregation of schools? Am I helping to screw over the kids at Broussard Elementary by creating plans for magnet elementary schools in the district that will essentially pull all highest achievers out of Broussard Elementary to avoid contamination (Canada’s word)?

So I pray in silence next to Sarah at night, but I don’t tell her about it. I thank God for her and for Leo. I become very appreciative of the things I have. What I’m really doing, of course, is just thinking very positive thoughts in a deep part of my brain in a self-interested attempt to make myself a happier person. Help me be happy so I can make others happy, I say. I ask God to watch over my dad, and I hope he’s happy in his new form in the cosmos. I ask “God” to please, please watch over Sarah and not to let her have a seizure, and to keep her and Leo safe. I ask God to show me signs, to give me opportunities to make good decisions, and I thank him for the signs he’s shown me so far. Basically, I do all this because I need to. I’m so scared and so hopeful and so distraught, I need to talk to God, even though I don’t believe anyone hears me except myself. I do think that praying in this way sets some kind of human energies in motion that do have a positive effect in some way or another. At least, I don’t think I have anything to lose by “praying.”

What else would you expect from someone marinating in all this grief and terror? Now, when my wife doesn’t get a full-night sleep, and she *rarely* gets a full-night’s sleep, even though it is I who gets up with Leo in the night and at 3:30 and 4 in the morning, she has “ticks,” and

ticks are like daggers in my heart. Or, let me be more original. They make me want to howl in agony from deep inside. They're loud, usually just a loud vowel sound in the middle of a sentence. So if I was talking and –uh-UH!—that happened. That's the sound of a seizure trying to happen, and it is pure horror. I don't know if you've ever seen your best friend, your life partner, who happens to be the best thing about you—the only redemption for your selfish nature—the only one who loves you, who looks at you and has NEVER asked you to change anything about yourself, who sees you as you never imagined anyone would see you. An angel to you, basically. An angel. Have you ever seen your angel fall to the ground in a grand mal seizure, eyes open and bloody foam bubbling at the mouth, kicking and seizing, completely unresponsive to your voice, so deep within herself you think she may never come back? Her eyes close and she goes to sleep, breathing disturbingly heavily in and how through clenched teeth, until she wakes up in a puddle of piss and jumps terrified at the sight of you, not knowing what year it is. Have you ever seen your angel do that?

Digression: My Virtual School, My Apocalypse

It's Thursday, March 21st. On Monday, I have a meeting with Daniel Jones. I'm looking at his LinkedIn profile, and I can see the major steps in his career. (Bethany Field tells me he's young, "like [me].") It appears that he started as a teacher in Teach for America. He then became a "K-12 Associate" at the Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation. Then he became a Research Assistant at the American Enterprise Institute (whatever the hell that is). Then he became a Reform Fellow at the Louisiana Department of Education. Then, working for the Louisiana Department of Education, he became the Executive Director of the Office of Parental Options and then Deputy Director of the same office. Now he's either Chief of Staff at the Office of Portfolio as LinkedIn states, or Executive Director of Planning and Strategy in the Office of the

Portfolio, as his email signature states. So this is clearly a (very successful) guy on the forefront of private-minded education reform. He is a champion of choice and using corporate models to improve public schools. Also, because he has risen so well and is so successful, I have to imagine that he is good looking. And I'm about to do an image search. But I'm guessing he has all his hair, is in good shape, and has a symmetrical face. Let's test this theory.

So I have a meeting with him on Friday. Since my interview with Bethany Field on Tuesday, I have been dreaming hard about opening a virtual/blended learning charter school. Talking with Bethany shaped my dream again. Now, instead of wanting a private school in order to flee the mandated testing of the public realm, I want to go charter. This is based on a couple things. One, when I asked her how she felt about standardized testing, she said she was honored to test her kids. You see, she *has* to love testing because testing is what allows her to prove that her school is teaching kids. Testing gives her school and her curriculum credibility. This makes sense. So even if I opened a private school, I'd still want to implement testing in order to show colleges that my school was academically rigorous. There is no escape from testing. I think, though, that in a virtual situation, you can open up enough time to train for testing that it becomes a less threatening thing. It becomes an opportunity and a challenge instead of something Satanic in a Blakean sense. How Blake would feel about this testing, is, I think, similar. When public schools are over-tested, that's Urizen crushing the spirit of Orc. A virtual format creates some freedom, and I do believe that Blake would approve. I know my dad would. He thought technology was neat, especially in its way of attracting financial matter.

The other part of our conversation that spurred me to let my dream evolve into a public charter school was Bethany's response to my question about what she wishes she could offer but can't. Because her school is full-time virtual, she can't have a tutoring center. She wishes she

could also offer a blended learning format, because, as she said, some students really do need face-to-face contact. And in my opinion tutoring has always been maybe the most important aspect of MSA virtual. One on one attention is so important for learning. Yes, it can be done over the phone. But for some kids, it has to be face to face. Offering a virtual AND blended learning option would both be better for kids, allowing us to service more of them in better ways, and it would justify the construction of a progressive learning space, which is so integral to my dream. Why have a space that talks, that demonstrates the goals of the school, if there's no reason for students to visit? I want a huge, amazing garden. Maybe a bicycle maintenance shop. I want green, progressive activities to help mold students into stewards of the environment, and I think this would go over very well in New Orleans. Progress Learning Center. It has to service a local region while still offering a full-virtual program to kids who aren't local.

So my floating dream school has been public charter and private, and now it's public charter again. Does this mean I will be pulling money away from the public school system? Yes. And I'll have to negotiate what this really means from a variety of perspectives. That's a big issue. One thing that Ravitch said that resonates for me is the mantra: Do No Harm. Do No Harm. It echoes in my soul. If I'm weakening the public school system, I'll be doing harm. I won't be able to sleep at night. So, what am I looking for: a balanced consideration of the ethics of charter schools or a way to justify following this dream? Am I a champion of ethics or a self-interested spin-doctor?

I emailed Bethany to thank her for telling me that Louisiana is currently soliciting applications for charter schools and to ask for any advice for how to conduct myself in front of Daniel Jones. She said to know the state guidelines, the rubric. Being able to adhere to the Laws of the state is how she's built her credibility. So Urizen has to act here. She also suggested that I

have a pretty clear vision. Los has to be operating clearly and with a solid hammer. Of course, it's Orc that's fueling this whole thing. I want the freedom to create! I want no shackles! Arrrgh!

So what am I going to tell him? I am going to give him a vision of the Louisiana Progress Virtual School and Learning Center. This is a virtual and blended school that offers core courses using EdGenuity and offering tutoring from certified facilitators. Hours from 8 a.m.-7 p.m., special courses in Urban Agriculture and Bike Maintenance. Its evolution would entail solar power, shipping containers, and our own instructional videos. Grades 9-12 to begin with the possibility of opening up to younger grades as time goes on. All the benefits of individually tailored virtual education with an emphasis on making the world a better place. I also want an emphasis on technology—computer coding to be exact.

So I need to come up with a concise and compelling description of this school before my meeting on Monday. I need to perform, to sell, to sell with my clothes, body, face, and gestures. My eyes. At my dad's funeral, Jamie Anthony, his best friend for over thirty years, told about how my dad trained him to sell. The most important aspect was doing your homework. This makes sense. I'm reminded of all the "homework" my dad cut out of newspapers and printed off the internet for me about how to establish good credit, etc. My dad is whispering in my year, Do your damn homework.

I've been through all the materials Bethany mentions, but I need to pore over them, to memorize them. And that'll be my weekend.

Am I sure I want this? Yes. Louisiana seems to have a vital DEMAND for what I can offer. And that's something amazing. That's a sign. That's the reason I came back here. Once I do this in Louisiana, I can open other schools. Within five years, I could be opening a school in North Carolina, building and improving on what I've already accomplished in Louisiana. I think

it's the best possible plan to get back to NC in the best possible way. Improving the lives of hundreds and providing a nice life to my family.

Sue always reminds me of the almost preposterousness of me running a school any time in the next couple years. She abhors the ambitious, corporate, overconfident douche bag opening a school, having it fail and leaving the kids screwed over, and then moving on unscathed. She challenges every assumption I make and assures me that there is no safe landing pad in terms of design for a school that will have no nettlesome questions. Starting a school is a big, big deal. You become responsible for the welfare of kids. She thinks, for example, I may come back to the idea of a private school that is neighborhood oriented, and in which all students get in for free. Maybe my dream will evolve in that direction. I can tell that she is deeply skeptical about the appropriateness of me even considering opening a school. She is deeply distrustful of people with power in the Louisiana corporate-modeled effort to reform schools who don't have extensive backgrounds in teaching. She's right. I have to be very careful of overconfidence.

And this makes me wonder if I'll be visiting Jones as a spy or as someone genuinely interested in opening a school. I don't know. I don't really want to know.⁵⁰

And then there's this quote from Meier on school choice:

There is no chance that parents with the power to do so will not use their advantage to get the best programs, classes, and teachers for their children within whatever school they find themselves. That is what being a good parent is all about, doing the best you can do for your child. (99)

⁵⁰ This, ladies and gentlemen, is the unintentional performance of imbalance: I am audacious, paternalistic, divorced from reality, obsessed with material goods, unhealthy, self-indulgent. It's horrifying to see the way I thought before Sue's intervention. Then again, the fact that I'm cringing makes me think there's something happening here that could be of value to readers.

Digression: Blake's Symbology

"Circumference"

To gain awareness of our interconnectedness and how we can take action to change the world in carefully considered ways, we have to first recognize and then explode any perceived limit to what we think is possible. Blake invokes this idea through his theme of Circumference. The fear of otherness is both caused by and perpetuates oppressive "Laws & Moralities." If we expand our self-conceptions, we inevitably understand how all people are of a single natural substance, instead of "Condensing them into solid rocks with cruelty and abhorrence/ Suspicion and revenge" (232). Supposed caps to what is possible, Blake expresses, should always be scrutinized. The energy of Orc takes delight in smashing through arbitrary limits that people on the rewarding side of oppression would wish the oppressed to assume as fixed Laws.

Friday, March 22nd, 2013

Sarah's voice has a velvet quality in the other room as she and Leo exchange ooOOoo, like the sound of a realization. Now he emits a more plaintive expression of dissatisfaction. And it grows slowly like an ember glowing to life into a sob. This it muffles down like a candle being extinguished, and I know he's got his thumb in his mouth, then it explodes into a wail, containing gorgeous little nonsense constructions like ni-ah-why-boo and then some hiccup-sounding emissions and a gargley scream. This is the point that I'll usually snap out of writing and pick him up and let him sit on my forearm and perhaps lay his head on my chest or shoulder. Eventually, the surroundings, especially the floor, will draw his attention, and he'll lean forward, pronish (made-up word), and kind of will me to take him around so he can blankly take it all in.

I should tell you about the first major tick Sarah had after giving birth to Leo. The sleep deprivation became intense the night after the birth, since we had been up all night the night

before while Sarah was being induced. It doesn't take much to feel sleep deprived. And then by the second day of Leo's life we had only gotten a few 2-hour snippets of sleep. On the third day, we went home. That night, we had successfully gotten the freshly born thing latched—

Wait. First I want to recall the way he cried when I had to change his diaper for the first time the night we got home. He was absolutely fuck-off wailing with his entire pure self. Screaming, thrashing his brand new, tiny throat. Head red and eyes mashed shut. There was a wave that went through me. A calming wave that came to extinguish the flames of stress. The thought occurred to me right then in this calm, that this baby was going to teach me so much and improve me so much, that he was doing good for me while I was doing good for him. I had already had this sensation with my newborn son on my bare chest the evening of his first day alive. We had read in a book given to us by a friend's midwife mom that skin-to-skin contact was excellent for the baby, to make him feel, you know, OK. I had always imagined that a baby's skin must come aflame with the sensation of air when it's first born, but I don't think this was the case. He was just a wet, wrinkled soul.

With Leo on my bare chest, I imagined something like stem cell osmosis. Like the perfect health of his brand new energy was purifying my own soul.

So Leo taught me patience, allowed to surprise myself with the depths of my patience I didn't know existed, and he purified my soul. This was a pretty good deal. The first night, while Sarah slept, Anthony and I hung out in the bonus room and played the new *Zelda* game on the Wii while Leo slept in a basket, in the glow of the video game. Before Sarah had gone to sleep she had had a little tick, a quick, forceful vowel sound in the middle of a sentence. And then one while she was feeding Leo, but this one was silent. In fact, it made me angry for a moment. We had gotten him latched to Sarah's breast—a stressful and difficult process at first, but it was

getting easier—and she held him in the proper way, supporting his body and head, and then in an inward burst she squeezed him to her body somewhat violently. In my loathsome ignorance I said “Sarah, what the *fuck?*” And she looked at me blankly, obviously and very sadly unaware of what had happened. I remembered the paramedic from last time she had a grand mal seizure, who asked her, *Do you know what year it is?* She didn’t.

The next morning she had a couple more ticks, and we were scared, and, not knowing what else to do, I told her to call her doctor, the OBGYN, to ask what she should do. I could feel that she was going to have a seizure like you feel the pressure change before a storm. Something electrical. She called and they gave her the emergency number to page Dr. Gunter. Then she hung up and had a grand mal seizure in my arms on the bed. It just happened. Her eyes didn’t close all the way, she just seemed to look at the window, seizing hard and very violently, and gradually the bubbles and then pink bubbles appeared at her mouth, and Leo had already taught me how to handle this by speaking lowly and sweetly to her, patiently waiting for her to stop. With one hand on her I called 911 and by the time the EMR crew arrived, Sarah had woken from the deep, deep sleep with the breathing through the clenched teeth with the bloody foamy spit that follows the actual seizing. She jumped with terror when she opened her eyes and saw me looking at her.

The same medic from last time was in the group that appeared in the third floor bedroom. I said to him, “Hey, you were here last time.”

One thing I really like about Leo is his constant smiling and squealing with delight. What I like even more is when he *screams* with delight. And the very little, bending tones that curl in to the air and reverberate in the kitchen. If you tickle his ribs with your chin, he’ll crack up and look above you and hold your head to his heart like he’s proud of *you*.

Digression: On Privatization

Things become a little nebulous when we try to make sense of the current trend towards school choice. Several factors seem to be pushing the U.S. in this direction. Parents of students zoned to low-performing schools with high dropout rates, low college acceptance rates, gang violence, drugs, and unimpressive teachers make parents want immediate alternatives for their kids. Then, you have organizations spending huge sums of money starting private and charter schools. Many charter schools have moderate success with aggregate test scores; many don't. Many close soon after they open their doors.

What's behind these gigantic, billion-dollar school reform efforts? Are we seeing a continuation of earlier reform efforts designed to keep social peace and protect private property? Is Bill Gates only concerned about providing meaningful education to our youth? Does it matter?

Hursh suggests that both *A Nation at Risk* and the NCLB Act are responses to the fear of falling economically behind other countries that NCLB is "part of a larger political process in which concerns about increasing global economic competition have been a pretext for neoliberal reforms that focus on increasing efficiency through privatization, markets, and competition (514). Hursh's contention is that schools are being reformed (through high stakes accountability) in order to bolster our competition in the global neoliberal market. It's part of a larger trend toward privatization, which allows the trends of the market to determine what and how we do what we do. Money, rather than human ideals, according to Hursh, are driving education reform under NCLB. A voucher program was initially included in NCLB (502). "The aim of NCLB and other high-stakes testing reforms therefore may be less about improving student learning and closing the achievement gap than it is about undermining public education to introduce a market-

based system” (504). Therefore, the goal of reform for neoliberals is to privatize education, to create a competitive market (501).⁵¹

Saturday, March 23, 2013

I’ve always wanted to be in an autonomous position to help people and to use my natural proclivities for communication and creativity. When I was a kid, I wanted to be an Episcopal priest. Then I thought being a college professor would allow me to fulfill this mission. And now I’m lucky to have realized that starting a charter school is the best way for me to direct my energy, passion for education, and desire to improve the world for some kids who didn’t get to have the kind of childhood I did, which was comfortable enough for me to focus on challenges of my choice, rather than imposed upon me. I didn’t have to think about what I would eat or how I would protect my sister, like my own father did, I only had to worry about my school project or a story I was writing.

My Faculty: Bottom line: there are a LOT of INCREDIBLY talented teachers applying for scholarly positions at universities. Why? Because of the kind of life they want for themselves. An environment, like a comfortable childhood, where one has the good fortune of being able to choose her own challenges. Support for scholarly activity and the privilege of teaching bright college students. My school will be the kind of environment that will in fact be

⁵¹ So, does a conversation about current education reform necessitate a conversation about wealth distribution? The documentary film, *Park Avenue*, addresses some issues about the role of money in politics. Take Paul Ryan and the Ayn Rand philosophy. This is an example of someone acting thoughtfully or reflectively but missing a crucial ingredient: compassion. Ayn Rand is interviewed on video tape; she communicates her belief that absolutely everything should be private, that there should be no public schools. This represents pretty well the view of the Tea Party, which, while currently weakened, I think, is, like, kind of a major party in the U.S., with a butt ton of supporters and a LOTTA LOTTA cash. There is a large movement, supported by big money (Koch brothers, Americans for Prosperity, etc) that wants to eliminate national debt by pretty much ending all social programs and letting the private sector fill all our societal needs. Scary as hell.

better than a tenure-track assistant professorship for those in that pool of talent for whom teaching is more important than scholarship. I'm such a PhD student, and I can recognize others well. The environment of my school will draw the best of this type of enthusiastic person.

Using courseware like EdGenuity or Connections Learning, I won't have to have certified teachers for each subject. Rather, I will employ full-time facilitators with PhDs to serve as "guides on the side," providing guidance, tutoring, modifying course content (if it's legal, and this is a question I have: Could noncertified facilitators modify course content?), and serving as the learning coach for students. These people will be the backbone and the spirit of the school, and I want to pay them \$60,000 per year with full benefits. I won't need many, but they have to be of the best quality, the most dedicated, the sharpest, the best communicators, the best examples.

The mission of the school will be to offer excellent high school education to neighborhood kids who desire an alternative to traditional brick and mortar education. Combining virtual lectures and individualized instruction with individual attention from talented faculty, communication across the curriculum, rigorous course material and dynamic test preparation, facilitating the mastery of all subject matter for all kids... The physical space will symbolize the fact that this isn't an isolationist situation. There won't be a seat time requirements but appointments with facilitators, computer labs in which grade level is obsolete (except for testing purposes). At any given point there are kids of different ages taking tests.

I'm showing up to this meeting to get a candid communication about Louisiana's desire for new charter schools and to inquire kind of virtual schools might be given consideration. To see if my interests and experience align with the state's needs.

The new Common Core emphasizes the very skills at the heart of what I've taught for five years—the ability to make and communicate meaning from ... or (I need a catchy teaching philosophy acronym).

- Full-virtual, individually paced high school curriculum.
- Intensive tutoring and learning coaching from staff of full-time PhD facilitators and part-time graduate students.
 - Available via phone or Skype if in person visits aren't possible.
- Communication Across the Curriculum: writing for every course, even math.
- Project-based learning, Service Learning opportunities
 - (So there will be modifications of online courses.)
- Dynamic Test Preparation: PARCC and ACT

Questions:

Can you tell me about the origins of the partnership with EBR, Jefferson, and Lafayette Parishes? Are these parishes where a virtual neighborhood charter school would be most needed?

Would it be legally possible to operate a virtual school and mandate attendance for testing, tutoring, and test prep?

Would it be feasible to hire full-time facilitators that have PhDs with teaching experience rather than people with teaching certification?

Tuesday, March 26, 2013

Beginning to sketch Proposal/Guidelines for MSA-Virtual. Not sure why I'm doing what I'm doing. Just mimicking guidelines sent to me for other virtual schools.

Yesterday, 3/25, I went downtown and had a meeting with James Hardman and Daniel Jones. I went through security. A lady gave me a sticky badge with my unflattering drivers license picture on it. A lady looked through my bag to make sure there were no weapons. I was greeted outside the elevator by a woman who brought me to a place to sit and wait for Mr. Jones. Some people walked past. Daniel came over. I shook his hand. I followed him to a very, very small conference room. I can explain more about these dudes' titles and backgrounds later. They heard me out. I told them that I had an idea for a school: The Louisiana Progress Virtual Learning Center. That might be a stupid name, since the learning center really isn't virtual: the curriculum largely is. It's a fully virtual curriculum but also a neighborhood school. But the courses are enhanced by projects and tutoring. Tutors/facilitators come from the awesome pool of PhD talent. They liked the idea. "Have you ever heard of anything like this," Daniel asked James. But they were both intrigued and supportive. Daniel explained through suggestion that this meeting was a precursor to a future meeting at which I would have more answers than questions. Humility is part of this—and part of the way this should appear. Then they told me about 4.0 in New Orleans and a program called Course Choice. Then they told me about a charter school opening in the fall called Bricolage, which started during the process they described and suggested: 4.0 and Course Choice. Then it became a pop-up school, offering a course in a museum space on weekends. Now it's opening. And that's the path, and it's really fucking exciting. I checked out the 4.0 website, and am going to try to get in there to start processing my idea. James and Daniel even suggested that they would mention me to Jon Murphy, who runs the program.

Digression: Blake's Symbology

“Imagination”

The most important faculty in exploding the Circumferences of our understanding is the imagination. What we imagine to be true constitutes our reality, and, in turn, determines the way we treat each other.⁵² The possibilities we imagine determine our abilities to break through the limits of what we might otherwise see as closed situations. Blake's greatest task is to awaken and nourish the imaginations of his readers, so that they understand that the greatest power we have is the power to imagine what we want so that we might take action.

Blake states his intention to stimulate the imaginations of his readers early in the poem:

I rest not from my great task!
To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the Immortal Eyes
Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought; into Eternity
Ever expanding in the Bosom of God, the Human Imagination. (213)

The speaker's “great task” is to open eyes which are “Immortal” because they are a universal representation of human insight. Opening worlds, opening eyes: this is the language of radical education. The diction is heavy with the idea of “Ever expanding,” which empowers the “Human Imagination” and automatically gives an implicit call to break out of strict reason.

As Chapter Four's epigraph, Blake inscribes, “I give you the end of a golden string,/ Only wind it into a ball:/ It will lead you in at Heaven's gate,/ Built in Jerusalem's wall” (310). The last chapter is the “end” of Blake's “golden string” of revolutionary thoughts and images. Blake suggests that following these thoughts and images, mixing up their order and unifying them into a single idea will lead us to salvation, to a place where we will know what we should do to make the world somehow better for everyone.

⁵² See Midgley and Livermore, p. 236, for a description of how 19th century conceptions of poverty corresponded to forced labor.

Wednesday, March 27, 2013

Reading Freire in the library. Here's the reason: To think about education as a subversive force. I also got a book (suggested by Sue) *Schooled to Order*. Yesterday Sue and I conversed for over an hour in her office. Such interesting topics as the reluctance of governments to educate their populations came up. I hadn't thought of intentionality when I thought of corrupt educational systems in America, and now I realize the kind of world I'm entering. It's all coming down around me, like a scene out of *Inception*. You might ask why the sky's folding in on me. Listen, maybe I like being a paid graduate student. Maybe I like that I can start a day's work when I feel like it, that I can sit here in a university library coffee shop on a well worn couch reading Freire with a Super Grande Mocha Latté I paid five bucks for. From the library to the gym to home. Who wouldn't want this life? Let's rewind. Now I have to consider intentionality in the disease blighting public school, and, were this a normal dissertation, I could complain, like Diane Ravitch. I could excoriate and publish and repeat. Give talks, sell books, be a guest on the Jim Engster show. But this is a dissertation about a very specific praxis. I am acting in the world. I am doing things. And I'm going to do more things. Because I have a dream for the kids of Louisiana and also for myself. I'm not sure I can simply cancel plans once I realize I'm implicated in something I find corrupt. Thus the cracking of the drywall in this very café. See, if John White is acting for Bobby Jindall and Bobby Jindal is acting in the interests of those who want to see public education destroyed because an educated population is a potentially radical population, a potentially revolutionary population, a population entirely not cool with the kind of wealth distribution we currently have, then my opening a charter school could be part of the fruition of this plot to intellectually disenfranchise the children of America. If this is the case, then while helping hundreds of kids with my innovative, effective, beautiful, progressive charter

school, I might be helping to disenfranchise hundreds of thousands. I tell you this because I owe it to you for reading thus far to be honest about the fact that the mind soon to be filtering Freire for you is probably going to be slowly entering the cold rather than swan diving in for a romp. I might not want to hear some of this because it threatens my ability to actualize on this dream I have for myself and for my family and for Louisiana teenagers who deserve the kind of education I want to provide.

Blake uses whirlwinds and storms of words and images to stir in the human mind a refreshed conscientização. Freire's project BEGINS with words. So this experiment in teaching adults how to recognize and use words is the very essence of creating the potential for apocalypse. Of course, just because a person has the physical ability to read words doesn't mean she will act on the world, which is always changing and which it is our job to change. Blake tries to open the mind of the person who is already literate with his certain prophetic devices, and Freire tries to open the mind of the illiterate with the express purpose of using language to change the terms of their oppression. To change the world for themselves and their families. Blake wants people to use their selfhoods and fears to act for others: Freire wants people to act for themselves and each other. Both emphasize collaboration and communication.

Freire writes, "Radicalization, nourished by a critical spirit, is always creative" (21). True, even radical privatization is creative. MY school idea is creative. But is that inherently good? Or, therefore, is creativity inherently good? Obviously a creative plan to oppress ain't good! He goes on to talk shit about sectarianism, which is a Blakean and Christian thing to do. "Sectarianism," Freire writes, "turns reality into a false (and therefore unchangeable) 'reality'" (22). In reality, there is no left and right—only the slippery space between.

The difference between the most right-wing sectarian (“a born sectarian”) and a “leftist-turned-sectarian (22). The latter is the person who attempts to contextualize reality with history and “goes totally astray” and “falls into essentially fatalistic positions” (22). Both kinds of sectarians hold the future as something too rigid, reality as something too rigid, and they both “end up without the people—which is another way of being against them” (23). “They both suffer from an absence of doubt” (23). They feel threatened if their truths are questioned. The radical keeps questioning, keeps learning, keeps reinterpreting, stays critical, doesn’t get pulled into the “circle of certainty.”

Digression: Meeting with Maria

While I’ve been teaching ACT prep, Maria has been working with math students around the district. Many of the students she has worked with have been using educational math courseware called Apex. Since I started here in January, everyone has been complaining about Apex. Maria doesn’t think the program is effective of all. She says, “You can have a kid who has completed 7000 problems [in Apex], but, if you sit down with him, he can’t explain math concepts or how to solve problems at all.”

It’s great that students can move at their own pace through educational software, but how do you know the kids are actually retaining information? Maria notes that students’ APEX test scores are far lower than quiz scores and homework, and she suggests that this is because they don’t have “help” on unit tests. In the courseware MyMathLab, popular at LSU and in Broussard Parish, for example, you can get help—examples, hints—for any problem that challenges you.

Maria and I talk about our joint project to train faculty in blended learning, especially flipping the classroom. We agree that motivation is the big problem. How do you get the students to want to watch the videos at home? This is the exact problem that Sarah’s aunt immediately

suggested when I told her about my new job. “*How ya gonna get the students to watch the videos, though? They won’t do it.*”

Maria has the feeling, based on many hours in the high schools in Broussard Parish, that students do not do any kind of school work at home. I have certainly found the same to be true with my 30 or 40 ACT prep students. They don’t watch the videos at home.

Maria and begin to feel that the people who hired us to get teachers to flip classrooms don’t have any idea what flipping a classroom would look like, and probably couldn’t explain clearly why they want this model implemented.

We wonder: Is transitioning to blended learning a subterfuge for firing teachers?

We don’t understand our mission. Maria says, “Show me an example of where a low performing classroom switches to a flipped model and then the district’s score improves.”

I say, “Good point.”

Digression: A Note from Freire

“Money is the measure of all things, and profit the primary goal. For the oppressors, what is worthwhile is to have more—always more—even at the cost of the oppressed having less or having nothing. For them, *to be is to have* and to be the class of the ‘haves’” (Freire 44).

April

Tuesday, April 2, 2013

When I was at the meeting with the young executives at the Louisiana Department of Education—the young executives who encouraged me and gave me the blueprint for the short path to opening a charter school, who called me an “entrepreneur,” there was a tiny explosion in me. Mr. Jones had talked about how many “moving parts” there are to running a school. I had the impression that this was scripted. I know that Louisiana is soliciting audacious people like

me to open schools. I also have the distinct impression that they have been trained to always communicate the massiveness of this ambition, or, um the difficulty, or um how anyone interested in pursuing such a big goal should proceed with humility. He mentioned humility at some point about something I'll make up later. He said that in five months we could have another meeting and that at this meeting five months in the future I should have more answers than questions. They were supporting me, encouraging me to pursue this line. They were impressed with me and encouraging. How else can I say it? They wanted me to continue.

This represented the end of the evolution of The Charter School of My Dreams. Because after reading Freire, I've realized that to help the kids of Louisiana or of any state—to help ANY kids—I need to be on their side. Shit, maybe I'll open a school some day. But this dissertation project has finally taught me to get over myself and look for employment in a public school district. Even though I won't make good money, even though my dad would most definitely NOT approve, the best way I can reconcile my love for teaching, my ambition to do something good for kids, and the knowledge I have gained during my research is to seek employment as a public high school teacher and to do so with joy and excitement. We might have to sell one of the cars to avoid the costs of upkeep, insurance, and ownership. I might have to bike to work like I've biked to work for all these years. The end of my PhD tunnel might not have a green and gold-hued light. I might never emerge from poverty. Oh well, Fuck it. Anyway, I remember how unhappy my dad was during his high-pressure career in insurance.

The summer before my dad died we had a family reunion of sorts, something we hadn't really done in like 20 years. My parents, relatively wealthy, rented a beautiful house across the street from a public access to one of the most gorgeous beaches you can imagine. Have you spent time on the Florida panhandle? The sand is white; the water is clear jade, and you can swim out

of a hundred yards before the water gets any deeper than fifteen feet. If you wear a snorkel mask, you can see innumerable sand dollars. You can collect some and bring them back to your pregnant wife, who'll take a picture and post it on Instagram for your beloved friends to "like." You can grill hamburgers for your family. You can take Xanax to avoid the stress that comes with having a family of republicans. And you all day, you can glance over at your dad, with his too-skinny-now legs and LSU visor, cigar in hand, iPhone playing a Jimmy Buffet Pandora radio station laying on his chest, insulating him from even your voice. You can see the satisfaction in his eyes. When he wants to have yet another conversation about the fact that he won't be around forever, and about how he's counting on you to "take care of your mother" when he's gone, you can once again assure him that you'll do that, that you won't let him down, even though conversations like this make you feel like you're five years old and wish you were five years old. You might remember, in fact, your fifth grade birthday party in Atlanta, when your dad and now-estranged older brother sat on stools in ponchos in front of my dad's first white BMW, taunting you and your Jams-wearing friends to throw water balloons at them. His hair wasn't even gray yet in 1986. He was tan and marathon-trained. And, Xanax-courageous, you can ask him if he regrets moving around so much, from Florida to Texas to Atlanta to New Jersey to North Carolina to Tennessee to North Georgia to South Georgia to Atlanta again, and he'll tell you, well, You get an offer to make that much money, and you have a family, you don't say no. And that's pretty much that.

My dad could be harsh, but he was loved. His personality was huge—that's probably why he was so successful as a sales manager and VP. He had his ugly moments. Like the one when we were driving down to Baton Rouge to find a place for Sarah and I to live, and when I told him how much someone with a PhD makes as a public high school teacher, he spat out the word,

“*sick!*” Not because he thought teachers were underpaid, but like he was as disgusted by the thought of me using my PhD to teach public school.

He could have said, “Why, that would certainly be noble.” He could have said, “I’ll be proud of you no matter what you do.” Or even, “Well, that path would give you some difficulties. You might not be able to travel as much as you’d like. You might not be able to give your kids the kind of education you might want to give them. So consider that.” This wasn’t guidance: It was disgust. It was repugnance.

And now, Dad, if you’re floating in the Universe somewhere, or, hell, maybe you’re in heaven, I hope you’ve shed some of that repugnance, and I hope you understand that I’ll be happiest doing the opposite of what you did.

Later I have a meeting with Melanie Godchaux during which we’ll go over MSA-Virtual guidelines. I have been asked to present the plan to the community of North Broussard this evening—the community still outraged by the closure of their high school. I don’t know what time the meeting is to be held, who will be attending, how it will differ from my presentation to the school board a few weeks ago, what questions I need to anticipate, or what new information I need to be able to provide. My coffee is very cold.

Wednesday, April 3, 2013

“Without strong relationships built upon the ebb and flow of dialogue, teaching becomes rote and therefore virtually meaningless” (Fecho 111).

I shouldn’t have dragged Sarah and Leo out to North Broussard for the community meeting last night. Poor things were walking in circles outside for like an hour and a half. Sarah did get some cool pictures of pretty light on massive, Spanish-moss-dripping Live Oaks. Have you ever been Down the Bayou? It’s the very beginning of April, so everything is soft and

vibrant. Wisteria, little yellow flowers in the field, dark chocolate cows meandering. And just through the cypress trees you see reflection. “That’s the Atchafalaya Swamp, right *there!*” I say, and I am amazed that it could be in someone’s back yard.

“Did you see that man?” Sarah asked. I didn’t. “He was sitting out on his porch, and his shirt was only buttoned to there, and his giant belly was sticking out.”

I approved. “Isn’t this *beautiful?*” I say. “We should live out here next year.”

“But then what would be the point of my mom coming down to help with Leo?” We’d be too far from Susie and Doug. Sarah’s damn epilepsy—always ripping me out of fantasyland.

When we got to the empty school, no one was there, except an IT truck outside the front door. I walked in, smelled the musk, saw the dusk dancing in the ray of yellow light through the window. Chairs had been set up in the computer lab section of the area slated to house the virtual school. A portable screen had been set up and a projector was running. Melanie Godchaux was there, trying to find an internet connection. There was none, and we struggled over this until about three minutes before the presentation was supposed to begin. Guys from the IT truck quickly established a wireless network (the reason we had been unsuccessful trying to connect before was that all the lines had been cut—I mean, it’s not a school any more. BTW, I’m still confused as to why the room is full of PCs actually running all day long. Have these seriously been sitting here running for four years?! The answer is somehow yes!). Arceneaux shows up, looking kind of stressed. He greets people walking in.

“You were here last Thursday, right?”

“Um, no, but you can pretend to recognize me.” Laughs.

This happens a couple times with slight nuance. I can't get my presentation to load. I switch computers. Then, the screen looks washed-out on the projector screen, and the words are illegible, and the screen is out of proportion—the right third of the screen is cut off.

Arceneaux: "Are you ready. Is it working."

"Um, yes, but..."

"HUH?" He starts calling for the IT guys, but it's not an IT issue: it's a Something Else issue. On my computer, the Prezi starts working. I scramble over to my bag to get my notes from the last time I gave this presentation, about three weeks ago, to the school board. No notes. This is when I thrive: How do you think I've always been so well-liked by my poetry students. I am, indeed, a master of winging it. I started talking, I started flowing. Let's rewind to earlier in the day.

During the meeting with Melanie, Ms. Nichols, Arceneaux, and Maggie, I said a couple things that really got Arceneaux excited. These were merely terms. "Lecture series." That got him out of his seat and pacing, somewhat red-faced. He kept tapping my leg. The other was a preferable synonym for tutor: "Learning Coach." I didn't even make these terms up: Lecture series is a university standard. And Learning Coach comes from one of the courseware companies. There was a pamphlet made by the lady, Ellie, who called me for assistance. Apparently, it cost the district \$18,000! (Misappropriation of funds is a major issue, as I've indicated.) A pamphlet. Eighteen Thousand dollars. That's almost half a teacher's yearly salary. Jesus. Anyway, Arceneaux looks it over.

"It's too white."

"What you mean? There's a black kid and a white kid right there."

“But down here, B., we need this to be a black. These kids look kind of preppy, like East Coast kids.”

“Well you can’t put a bayou kid on there!” And they laugh pretty uproariously.

“That’s true,” says Arceneaux. This is supposed to tell me something about the way South Louisianans self-identify. But it doesn’t articulate itself in my mind.

Arceneaux got kind of pissed during this meeting because Melanie and Deb were voicing concern about Plantation High School’s desire for a mandatory Virtual Hour. I kind of agreed that it drained away from the “specialness” of North Broussard’s Virtual School. Now I realize that was dumb, and I was just overthinking an attempt to help Arceneaux sell the school, and, really, I shouldn’t do that. The ladies were trying to protect Arceneaux from potential attacks from the community, but he accused them of trying to “stifle virtual learning.” He got so excited about my concepts/terminologies of Learning Coaches and a Lecture Series because these became selling points he could understand and work with in trying to convince the North Broussard community that this school is something beneficial for them (and therefore should quell some of their lingering resentment for his closing their local high school).

Let’s just say I’m still not sure whether Arceneaux is a hero or a villain. His passionate espousal of the corporate approach to education is still problematic in ways that haven’t quite effervesced yet.

OK, so back to the meeting. People are trickling in. Arceneaux is trying to butter people up—that’s a bad way to put it—he’s being friendly. It ain’t being reciprocated. The seats start filling up. People line up in the back of the room. And here’s the deal: I won’t give you a play by play. People have questions about the Virtual program. Some ask questions to illustrate the fact that what this school will offer the North Broussard community is NOT what they want. They

expose the fact (and note that I did say FACT) that MSA Virtual has the APPEARANCE of being an inclusive neighborhood school, but in fact the MSA “brand” as Arceneaux keeps calling it requires a 2.75 GPA to remain in the school. As one community member pointed out, this kind of sets students up for failure because there are NO entrance requirements. Come on in, the policy says, but you won’t be here for long if you can’t get your shit together. To be honest, as someone slated to be based at North Broussard, to be stationed there as a facilitator, I’m concerned about having to deal with disciplinary issues. I do not want to deal with that kind of shit. Tutoring—or, I’m sorry, Learning Coaching—yes. Discipline students who want to test my boundaries? Oh hells no, son. Helllllls no.

Anyway, you had this one man, probably in his forties, strong and with a deep, loud voice, who was still visibly wounded emotionally by the closing of North Broussard, upset because he had to take football away from his son because the bussing to and from Plantation High meant the kid was getting home at nine or ten o’ clock and sluggishly trying to get his homework done. His GPA slipped. Took the kid off the team and the GPA went up. People expressed a desire for a LOCAL, NEIGHBORHOOD SCHOOL. A REAL SCHOOL. WITH A FOOTBALL TEAM, for which they could rally together on Friday nights, as a community. I hear, “We want our kids back.” And “Please, give us our kids back.” I find myself nodding so much while people are expressing their points of view that one tall woman in the back in a t-shirt and head wrap said, “See? He understand what we saying! He understand but HE don’t,” pointing toward Arceneaux. Luckily, Arceneaux was oblivious to this.

I don’t like the way it feels while I’m sitting off to the side and Arceneaux sidles up to me, sits down, and says under his breath in my ear, “Doesn’t it make sense that I want to start small and build from there?” The reason I don’t like the way this feels is that he is bouncing a

retaliation off me and not really trying to absorb what they're saying. He's OBVIOUSLY more concerned about scores than about giving the community what they want. Which is to say he doesn't really care about these people. And all I can think is "I don't want to spend next year working here." But then, later, I rethink that. There is another side to this.

I kept wanting to speak up, but I never said a word after my presentation. I didn't want to be that responsible. What if I said something wrong or something I didn't really mean? What I wanted to say was this: Look, you're not getting exactly what you want. You're not getting a neighborhood school for all your kids. You are getting something different. But it IS something. I know you aren't going to be as happy about this as you would about a traditional school, and, personally, I think the idea to start bring back your school grade by grade is a much better idea than spending all the money it'll cost to start this virtual school. I wish we were giving them a neighborhood public school rather than a virtual school for only highly achieving students. So what can I do about this?

Well, it informs my praxis. It informs my career goals. Do I really want to open and operate a virtual charter school? Or do I want to commit my support to a public school as a teacher? Do I support public neighborhood schools? Or charter schools? How much will I finally let money motivate me and determine what I do day-to-day?

I called Melanie this morning to ask how the community's response to our presentation last night would impact the proposal that I'm writing. The answer was "not at all." The superintendent wants to "stay the course." No entrance screening for students. No entrance requirements. No worries about setting kids up for failure. All I can think is, well, fine. Because if we were to take a suggestion from the community and use it just to make them feel more involved, it would be fake anyway.

Maybe there is something to the idea that the Virtual School will allow students who don't do so well in a traditional environment to more fully reach their potential. Maybe we should give everyone a shot who wants to try. Maybe Arceneaux's comment that "school culture" can have a huge impact on a student's performance is very, very true. Maybe he's no kind of villain. Maybe he's misunderstood by the community members who tell him to his face, "We don't trust you." I guess only time will tell. I am hopeful that even though MSA Virtual is not really what the community wants, that they will like having it, and that it will give lots of kids a really dynamic, excellent education, and I'm hopeful that it will be a really cool place to work next year.

Thursday, April 4, 2013

Blake and Freire show us that we are all oppressed, even—and especially—those of us who don't know it. Freire's pedagogy is meant to liberate through praxis and Blake's is meant to liberate through inspiration that might lead to action. Freire writes, "No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors" (39). This helps us see Arceneaux's efforts to improve Broussard Parish as, kind of, fundamentally wrong. Arceneaux keeps emphasizing MSA as a "brand." He says, you would NEVER do this in business. He says, "You see what I'm doing here, right? We're using a corporate model." But, Freire would say, the corporate model is a "model from among the oppressors." Freire argues that truly liberating pedagogy begins with identification with the oppressed, identification based on the fact that we're all oppressed. The only people who aren't oppressed are the ones who take action to liberate.

At the community meeting Tuesday night at the North Broussard location, community members were becoming humanized in front of my eyes as they voiced their problems and exercised their rights. At points, Arceneaux could only stand there in front of them and hang his head. You could see that he was processing their humanity when they made him understand that bussing their kids 37 miles away was negatively impacting their lives. He had to put himself in their position then. It was a beautiful thing. When the gentleman to my left explained that they just wanted him to start bringing their school back, grade by grade, an apocalypse could have occurred. Arceneaux could have finally just said yes, we'll make it happen. Instead, he said things like, "Well, I'm not sayin something like that couldn't happen in the future." And when I talked to Melanie in the morning and she said that the meeting would have absolutely no impact on the superintendent's plans for MSA Virtual, it was disheartening.

I am implicated in this. Because I daydream about going to the school board meeting on Monday night and standing up in front of the board and vehemently suggest that they do not approve this proposal, to say that it is their duty as elected officials to represent the community genuinely and to express that the community genuinely wants a public neighborhood school in North Broussard that is open to all students. What a hero I'd be then. But wouldn't this violate my contract? I need that money to live this summer and write my dissertation.

Is virtual learning inherently oppressive? Or, at least, is the kind of virtual learning offered through EdGenuity inherently oppressive? I was thinking while lying in bed last night that it might be. EdGenuity's courseware is designed to prepare students for standardized tests. It does not teach students to be critical of their situations. It does not educate to liberate. It is owned by Pearson, a huge, conglomerate, for-profit company that has monopolized education. Does the CEO of Pearson give a damn about the kids of North Broussard? Not in a genuine way, I'll

guarantee. So there's that. Freire writes, "More and more, the oppressors are using science and technology as unquestionably powerful instruments for their purpose: the maintenance of the oppressive order through manipulation and repression" (46).

"Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth" (Freire 47). This is starting to make me feel all crazy and electric like reading St. Augustine did so many years ago.

Digression: Blake's Symbology

"Mutual Forgiveness"

Blake was a proponent of the antinomian sect of Christianity during his lifetime. The antinomians argued that Christ's most important lesson was that the practice of mutual forgiveness must take precedence over strict obedience to previously defined laws. This means what it sounds like: Christ's and Blake's espousal of mutual forgiveness means everyone should forgive everyone for everything. Resentment must dissipate before progress can be made, and this, of course, is directly at odds with the will of the Spectre. Forgiveness can be achieved once people identify with one another.

When Blake's narrator says that "Jerusalem in every Man" is "A Tent & Tabernacle of Mutual Forgiveness, Male & Female Clothings," in the opening stanzas of Chapter Three, Blake seems to suggest that radical social change begins in the joy arising from the opportunities to act based on a broadened perspective that unifies a group of minute particulars (Blake 277). In marriage, to return to the central conflict of the poem, you have the opportunity to think past Ulroic judgments based on gender, to direct the Spectre, who whispers selfhood, into acts of compassion, which means to compromise, to forgive, and to find the joy that comes from conversion to an awareness of the goodness of Jerusalem. Blake suggests that the joy and compassion that can exist in the enlightened marital union can exist in a society.

Saturday, April 6, 2013

Last night, I went upstairs to the Red Room, where Leo was sleeping in the play pen. I flipped a switch to let some light come through slatted closet door and lay down next to him, gazing at his face through the play pen mesh. He's changing, growing, emerging. When he was only hours old I felt a strange feeling at seeing his idiosyncratic ears: Uncanny that he *wasn't* either of us; he was total newness. I still feel like that. His hair has a ginger hue, his eyes are dark blue with ice blue centers. He's very sensitive to light. He loves bouncing. He loves the fan, laughs at the pull cords hanging down. Very soon he'll enter the U.S. public school system. *They become what they behold.* He'll be raised, in an important sense, by the employees of the public school system and by his peers.

Remembering Arceneaux at the meeting a few hours before the community meeting:
“I'm on FIRE about this shit,” with a kind of triumphant arm thrust.

Tuesday, April 9, 2013

8:08 pm

The motion to create the virtual school was unanimously approved by the school board last night. I will describe the meeting tomorrow—too late now.

Wednesday, April 10, 2013

At Plantation High.

“We're gonna fail English on purpose, and you gonna get fired,” says a girl standing up at her desk and laughing. It's not meant seriously, but only the student—and not Mrs. Henderson—is laughing. I sit in a chair next to Mrs. Henderson, behind her desk, in the corner of the room. The student is joking about failing English because there's some tension in the air about something having to do with a standardized test. Mrs. Henderson tells me that the parish

has mandated that the students' scores on the End of Course (EOC) test in English Language Arts must be counted as their final grades. Because this year the students did not take midterm exams, the standardized EOC test will be end up being worth 20% of the students' final grades. Apparently, the students and teacher see this as a threatening situation, as if students are not expected to perform very well on the tests. I infer that not only the school's score but Mrs. Henderson's personal score is under threat of lowering. Mrs. Henderson could lose her teaching license if her scores are too low for three years in a row.

The humor between the student and Mrs. Henderson was at first hard to see. I wasn't sure to what if any extent this student was trying to intimidate or inspire nervousness in the teacher. That's how it goes when you witness interactions between people who spend a lot time together and who have strong personal bonds. During third hour, I came back to Mrs. Henderson's class, and the same girl who said she would fail English purposefully so Mrs. Henderson would lose her job was the only student in the classroom going over college application materials. This is Mrs. Henderson's one planning period—fifty minutes long. Mrs. Henderson is telling the girl to fill out what tax information she can to find out what financial assistance programs she'll qualify for.

I walk to the faculty lounge and get my carrot-and-apple juice and the carrot taste is a little weird because the carrots were old because instead of juicing I've been eating terribly lately—Cane's, McDonald's, Little Caesar's. In the lounge, there's a chair next to a table with a phone and phonebooks. There's a decorative sign that says "A teacher is/ a special friend/ whose love and kindness/ never end." One thing I've noticed is that even though students often act up (Teacher: "Ya'll be quiet in the halls; they testing!" Disembodied student voice from hallway: "WOOOOOOO!"), there is a deep, solid, trustworthy relationship between teacher and student.

This doesn't show up on paper and therefore doesn't enter into the conversation when EdGenuity's sales team is pitching you.

Students come in for fourth hour and open their MacBooks. One student comes in frowning, looks at me with mild annoyance, lays her head on her book bag.

“Do your warm-up on blackboard, Brooklynn.”

“NO. I'm not in the mood. I don't want to talk to no one.”

Most of the students in the center of the room, and a few in the side rows work on their MacBooks. Students in the back and at the sides of the room gather and talk.

One student: “What's the name of the website?”

Another student, to the teacher, “Prom was fun. Wish I could do it again next year. What's the age you have to stop coming?”

A student answers, but I don't understand.

“Could lie and say I'm 17,” says the twenty-year-old junior. Three other students looking at prom pictures on one student's computer and don't stand for the Pledge of Allegiance. The other students do stand and mostly say it. This is also homeroom.

I hear a story first from Mrs. Henderson and then from a group of students: Without asking permission, Kid A told Kid B that he could borrow Kid A's father's truck. Kid B took Kid A up on the offer and did borrow the truck. Kid A's father was never informed that his truck had been loaned out. Kid A's father therefore reported his truck stolen, and Kid B got pulled over for driving a stolen vehicle. Kid B's father, as punishment for stealing a truck, shaved Kid B's head! The students in class were laughing.

“I'm a laugh at him. I'm a laugh at him AND cry at him. I'm gonna clown on him so hard.”

Next hour, there's a kid wearing a Nirvana hoodie, a kid who, I'm told, keeps asking about spoken word poetry and opportunities to learn more about it and possibly participate. Four or five white kids congregate in a corner. Davon, the apparently talented football star with a charismatic personality during our ACT prep classes, is in this English class. When he sees me, he stutter steps and changes his path so he can slap my hand. I'm OK with this: I'm glad he sees me as a person. Then, he goes to the back of the room and fidgets uncomfortably for the duration of the hour.

One slender-headed black kid raises his hand during an ACT exercise and asks me to come answer a question. He says, "Where do you work?" I explain that I work at MSA *and* PHS and also LSU. He says, "Don't you work at State Farm?" Now I notice nervous energy in his eyes. He looks scared but also amused and kind of thrilled. "Yeah didn't you work at State Farm with Phillip? That's what *he* said," nodding to a kid behind him, smiling.

"I don't know him, how'm I gonna say that?" referring to me. I realize this is a joke: Because I look so "white" they're suggesting that I work at State Farm Insurance with another, presumably very white man, named, Phillip. I find this hilarious. Because I do look like the caricature of a white person today with my boat shoes, slacks, Brooks Brothers power tie, and my blow-dried, parted hair style. I deserve to be made fun of, and I laugh quite a bit, and I regress to laughing a few minutes later despite myself. These guys are creative, and I feel like I would probably be friends with them, if I were a student at this high school.

But then they enter a new stage in their shit-talking, and I overhear the word "white" a couple times and their body language is disapproving, and, were I not in consciously-keep-it-cool-always-in-schools mode, I would have felt the slightest tinge of blustering. I don't like being called white. To do so in a creative, energetic way, like inventing the idea that I work at

State Farm and that I consort with men named Phillip—that's totally funny and OK—as opposed to negativity directed at me because of my ethnicity.

But also I appreciate this act of prejudice because all white people should know how it feels to be reduced to skin color.

Thursday, April 11, 2013

I was reading Freire as I walked from campus home today—about two miles. I had just ridden my bike to the bike shop to get my front derailleur replaced and was content to walk home with my face in the book. I had spent the first half of the day across the River at Plantation High School. I was there to help with EOC preparation, to help the principal in his never-ending anxiety about test scores, his never-ending mission to bring the school up from D status. I gave English III students some diagnostic quizzes. One was a worksheet I made up for comma and apostrophe usage, and some there/their/they're problems for good measure. I also slipped in some short answer questions to get a glimpse of their mechanics. All of this was and is to inform the content of some instructional videos I'll make for the parish. But there was some double-dealing on my part here, and I felt a little scandalous, but it was worth it. The short answer questions asked students to explain one time when they were happy at PHS, and one time when they wished they had been somewhere else. And it asked about their plans for after high school. A lot of the students had vibrant senses of humor, and so the day was fun for me, but there was a discernible and pressing undercurrent of hopelessness, of tension. The most common response was that there had never been a time a student was happy at PHS. (I'll give you some example responses.) Testing was going on. No bells. Guy walking around taking phones.

“Thematic investigation thus becomes a common striving towards awareness of reality and towards self-awareness, which makes this investigation a starting point for the educational process or for cultural action of a liberating character” (Freire 98).

So, like I said, I had just dropped my bike off and was content to walk with my face in Freire’s book. When you walk in the direction of our apartment, the last bit of campus is occupied by a magnet high school, the Louisiana State University Lab School. This is a five-star school that’s very hard to get into, whose teachers all hold graduate degrees. So, I’m walking past, and the school day has just ended, and the front lawn is full of students playing. Kids probably in sixth or seventh grade are engaged some kind of half-court soccer situation—about twenty kids involved. I see two white kids run and jump and bump hips like NFL players do. Then a black kid and a white kid do it. Then I see that what I’m seeing is a group of black, white, and Asian kids engaged in an activity harmoniously. It would give anyone pleasure to witness. You can see them rough housing, see that they are indeed kids—happy kids—that will almost certainly go to college if they want. Will major in psychology or biology if they want. Will come to college and leave college able to communicate. Will have opportunities. Not the case for the kids at Plantation High. The world doesn’t seem to want them.

“I can’t wait to get rid of her,” said one teacher about a surly student, the girl who wrote that the happy times at PHS are when she doesn’t get in trouble, and that the times she wishes she were elsewhere are when she does get in trouble. This is also the girl who complained after I ended a short, timed practice test, “I wanted to finish the story.”

The paper on which a student had written that he wants to major in psychology, but “will probably work in the plant” after college.

“College isn’t for all these kids,” a school board member had said during a meeting in 2011, of which I found video online.

So I’m walking past this harmonious melee of lucky, diverse, able, liberated kids, and I’m thinking of PHS, and I read the following: “Thus, it is not the limit-situations in and of themselves which create a climate of hopelessness, but rather how they are perceived by men at a given historical moment: whether they appear as fetters or as insurmountable barriers. As critical perception is embodied in action, a climate of hope and confidence develops which leads men to overcome the limit-situations” (89).

Remembering Arceneaux’s smile after the board unanimously approved the school.

Digression: Blake’s Symbology

“Jerusalem”

S. Foster Damon writes that in Blake “Jerusalem is Liberty (*J* 26:3; 54:5). As the Emanation of Albion, she is the inspiration of all mankind. She is the Divine Vision in every individual (*J* 54:3). She is also the Holy City of Peace, which is the perfect society” (Damon 206). Damon’s dictionary displays an awe-inspiring investigation of the influence of Christianity on Blake’s work (Blake: who carried the Bible with him everywhere he went), which is necessary to a full understanding of Blake’s Christian allusions. Jerusalem symbolizes a society of total liberation, and, as Damon writes, “Liberty was taken as a gift from God. From *Leviticus* xxv:10 on (the inscription on the American Liberty Bell), the idea grew from political to spiritual significance” (206). While it may be distracting to some that Blake’s social ideas were based on Christian thought, it should be first explained that Blake’s thoughts about biblical mythology were largely original. He was, as they say, taking biblical ideas and running with them. Second, I think there’s an interesting correlation because the American Liberty Bell was forged during

important developmental years of American public education. For Blake, “Liberty was more than a special privilege of the Elect: it was a requisite of all society. ... The spirit of Christ ... and the liberty of the individual are essential to each other” (206-7). There’s a connection between the individual and the rest of humanity. Minute Particulars are not microcosms of the world—not synecdochal in that way—but instead parts of one whole, metonymical. This is not my idea, but I don’t know if anyone has called it “social metonymy,” which is the phrase that I’m led to use. Damn it, I just Googled “social metonymy” and a slew of results popped up. I don’t know what to say about the fact that social metonymy has interested a lot of writers and critics. I guess it’s reassuring that so many people are thinking about a social practice of metonymy, of conceptualizing the individual as an interconnected part of everyone and everything in nature. Using the Christian concept of Jerusalem to make this point—and, even better, to set the stage for readers to make this point themselves—which is the only real way to learn something, to let it sink in and become part of you—shows how “Blake translated the Biblical symbolism of the mystical Marriage into sound sociology” (206-07). But consider this translation of mysticism into “sound sociology,” in reference to United States school reform. What does the mystical William Blake Academy look like? Are there computer labs, or furnaces?

Friday, April 12, 2013

Drinking Barefoot Cabernet. The over-emphasis on accountability has denied America’s youth their right to a meaningful, nourishing education that involves learning to think critically, “developing a consciousness which is less and less false” (Freire 125). And by false, think about the levels of reality limned by Plato, Spinoza, Blake. Education should lead kids out of Ulro. Who is responsible for this over-emphasis on accountability? Who gains from it? How does Pearson capitalize on it? True revolution involves action and thinking with people. “The

dominant elites, on the other hand, can—and do—think without the people—although they do not permit themselves the luxury of failing to think *about* the people in order to know them better and thus dominate them more efficiently” (126). People of the oppressor class want “for the people not to think” (127). The oppressor class does not want popular education.

Like evil Roy Cohn in *Angels in America* (and real life), understanding corruption, understanding ignorance and expertly playing the system for personal gain, for power. I’ve talked elsewhere about how Cohn seeks to perpetuate Ulro. “In the process of oppression the elites subsist on the ‘living death’ of the oppressed and find their authentication in the vertical relationship between themselves and the latter; in the revolutionary process there is only one way for the emerging leaders to achieve authenticity: they must ‘die,’ in order to be reborn through and with the oppressed” (Freire 127). For example, as a white American male of upper middle class birth who has always benefited indirectly from the oppression of others, I must kill my selfhood, become more human, in order to gain authenticity. I suppose resisting the wishes of my mom, which carry on the wishes of my dad, and in becoming a public school teacher, I can accomplish a little something in this way. But it’s obvious that in doing so I’m benefitting myself by freeing myself of oppression, and that the authenticity that this gives me could be propelled into my vertical climb by helping me get a university position, one of the best jobs in the world.

Cultural synthesis is about unifying, entering, becoming part of a totality instead of an isolated fragment in the process of blasting past the Circumference of the limit-situation.

Sunday, April 14, 2013

Yesterday, I had a long conversation with Roger at the Piety St. Market in New Orleans. I asked him about his decisions to be vegan, to be an overworked high school teacher. Trying to figure out how he has so much success in acting according to his beliefs. How he connects the

personal to the public. He says that working more than 60 hours a week pisses him off. He says that the smell of meat sometimes tempts him. So it's not that it's somehow easier for him. I don't understand how some people are just so *good*. And I don't know whether or not I'm envious.

Roger went to Brown University. He is a smart guy. If Roger could see any reform happen in the realm of public education, he would want to see teachers have a one-to-one teaching to planning ratio. So that for every class a teacher teaches, she has a period to plan.

Monday, April 15, 2013

"Terror Attack At Boston Marathon" is the headline on the TV screen while Leo fondles and sucks at a canvas part of his Johnnie Jumper, a contraption in the doorway that allows him to jump up and down, up and down, strengthening his squishy legs. He beams at me when I smack my lips, light (literally, from an overcast sky through the window) shining in his eyes, a sheen of drool on his chin.

CNN on the television. At least two dead; at least 110 injured. The news anchors speak reassuringly. "In terms of the blast, what we have is relatively modest. ... This clearly wasn't a suicide bombing. ... You can still see the signs on the shops." It's as if they're saying, "It's not REAL terrorism, people. You can still see the shop signs!"

Leo absolutely screams with delight and bounces *wisha-wisha-wisha*, then a little moan, little low noises, he bounces three times, swings diagonally. Keeps smiling huge, squealing so loud you can hear the punching bag in his throat ringing.

I switch the channel to Fox. Fox headline. "Boston 'Act of Terror.'" A voice says, "At this moment, a person of interest in the hospital. ... Twin explosions on Patriot's Day in Boston."

And just recently the news media has been flooded with video of that chubby Kim boy, the heir to the throne in North Korea, firing handguns on crappy-looking local Korean TV and

firing missiles at remote control planes. I feel shackled to human culture when society appears hopelessly chaotic. There's a feeling of oppression hanging in the air, and we're all implicated. We all suffer because of it. But for me, as a Minute Particular in this Universe, this hopelessness is the programmatic reality of inaction. Like when life-circumstances cause you to taper off of a workout routine that's been making you really happy, and you slowly slip into inactivity, and your energy drops, and the animal in you gets depressed. You can always act. And then act again. And then you're in a good habit and feeling great again. You have to see past the Circumference, break the program of laziness.

Tuesday, April 16, 2013

I don't believe in signs and yet I can't stop the signs. Yesterday, Sandra told me that MSA-West was going to need an English teacher next year. Broussard Parish would pay me a little over \$49,000 plus benefits to teach English full-time. This means that by the end of next year I could have my PhD and a year of teaching public secondary under my belt.

Is this my opportunity for praxis? What would my council of advisors suggest me to do? Freire, Blake, Sarah, my ghost father, my Republican mom, Sue, my friends? Is this a sign? I reached a conclusion about teaching as praxis, and here's the opportunity! I can't believe this! A real job! Benefits! Insurance for Leo and Sarah!

Thursday, April 18, 2013

12:32 p.m.

I just finished Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. It's April 18th. I'm at a local coffee shop. I have an idea in my head about the way my story will be organized, with Blake at the front and then Freire and my Broussard experiences, put together in some interwoven way, and then I get here to this jumping off point.

I'm thinking through a decision: whether or not to become a full-time teacher in Broussard Parish next fall. A position has been offered to me, but I have to decide very soon in order to register for the necessary coursework this summer. If I take the job, I'll be giving back to the community that has given me so much. I'm gonna call Roger and get his advice. My mom is thoroughly against it. My soul feels sick. I'm at this coffee shop. I would make a good salary--\$49,000 + benefits—to teach in Broussard Parish. They want me there. I would teach English and Creative Writing, going between MSA-West and Plantation High School. Of course, I would not have my PhD or any time to make progress. I would have to finish my dissertation and graduate while working as a full-time teacher. I would do that. It would be a very stressful grind. Every day would be a struggle, and I would probably lose hope a lot. But, we'd have good insurance, wouldn't have money stress so much, and at the end of the year I would have ground out a dissertation, gotten certified to teach high school (big time location options—we could go home!) and have gotten a year of teaching experience.

If I don't do it, I remain a full-time student, work in Broussard at MSA-North and on whatever else they want me to do. I finish my dissertation while working part-time. Mom said, "I'm sure you'll make the right decision." My mom was very successful in real estate.

5:20 p.m.

My brain is exhausted and I feel like I'm covered with ants. Health insurance, a savings account, food on the table, money socked away for moving expenses. It all hangs there, and I could easily reach out for it. Fifty thousand. Creative Writing.

Friday, April 19, 2013

Immediate snap to a huge public while watching network news in aftermath of shooting of one of the two Boston bombing suspects. I am an American all of a sudden. A citizen of the

world. A person concerned with safety. One who abhors murder. I have watched *Zero Dark Thirty*. I have been shown a bomb going off in public in that movie. The moaning. More than ten people in Boston lost limbs because of these shrapnel-filled pressure-cooker bombs.

A thought jabs its way to the front of my mind: following the thought that lots and lots of people who make up the rest of the reading public of which I'm part, of which I'm metonym and not synecdoche, now know that there's some way to make bombs with household items. Now the CIA or FBI or Homeland Security or NSA will be watching for spikes in pressure cooker sales.

You can bet that this is good for the virtual school business. All these school shootings, all this public violence. People are scared. Hell, I'm even a little scared. More and more, people will choose to work at home, get schooled at home.

Because this very morning I told Melanie and Sandra that I won't be teaching for their district next year (because I have to finish THIS dissertation before I start teaching in order to stay sane for my family), which means that I'll be dividing my time between THIS dissertation and working at MSA-Virtual, which means that I'll be gaining more and more diverse experience with the virtual school that I designed and presented and got approved. Yes, it's good that I have left my options open in terms of a career. Hard to turn down \$50,000 when we're so sick of being poor. Virtual schools. Why, hello.

Digression: Blake's Symbology

"Apocalypse"

Blake's term *apocalypse* is similar to Paolo Freire's term *praxis*. Apocalypse signifies action based on the radical education of mutual forgiveness Blake offers in his poetry. Although most recent studies of Blake focus on the poet's concept of apocalypse as a personal, mental

change instead of a social transformation, Christopher Hobson suggests that Blake's view of apocalypse is both mental *and* social (Hobson 27).

Sutherland observes that during his late career Blake shifted his emphasis from hopes of revolutionary success and imminent apocalypse by a whole society to concern for the mutual forgiveness of sins and the winning of apocalyptic vision by individuals. But "the winning of apocalyptic vision by individuals" is deeply intertwined with collective apocalyptic vision. To illustrate this, Blake repeats with slight alterations the phrase "they became what they beheld" several times in *Jerusalem*. For example, when "every-one that saw" Luvah becomes frightened of his "horrible Form," "they hid in caves/ And dens," and, terrified, "they looked on one-another & became what they beheld" (252). Blake uses ambiguity to show that it is both "one-another" and the "horrible Form" of Luvah that everyone becomes. They become what they perceive as horrible, and they become the fear they see in each other. Fear is also contagious. This logic suggests that the more minute particulars who receive and act upon radical, liberating educations, the more the movement will spread to other minute particulars. If many people act upon the understanding that compassion is good for everyone, then the movement will spread, putting us in a state of becoming Jerusalem rather than Ulro. Nowhere is this more important than in our schools.

Saturday, April 20, 2013

A dissertation is traditionally thought of as a masterpiece. A master work, a contribution to the collective body of knowledge in the new PhD's discipline. This is pretty old school, growing from the classical notion that abstract knowledge is axiomatically good but its application base. James Paul Gee is one of the people writing about education that offers some critical perspective on this played-out way of privileging content. "The problem with the content

view is that an academic discipline, or any other semiotic domain, for that matter, is not primarily content, in the sense of facts and principals. It is rather primarily a lived and historically changing set of distinctive social practices. It is in these social practices that ‘content’ is generated, debated, and transformed via certain distinctive ways of thinking, talking, valuing, acting, and, often, writing and reading” (Gee 21). These ways of thinking, talking, valuing, and acting, of course, are not static but always changing.

What I am doing is like what Gee calls “active learning.” “Three things, then, are involved in active learning: *experiencing* the world in new ways, forming new *affiliations*, and *preparation* for future learning” (23). The content with which I have engaged during coursework and exams informs this new learning experience, this active learning experience, which is more meaningful, because it is connected to praxis. Because it is action, it plays a more impactful role in transforming the world. For better or worse, then, this is my masterpiece. The masterpiece of a monster.

4:53 p.m.

Talked to Bookman. Told him my prospectus meeting is tomorrow. Explained my project sort of. He said it sounded like auto-ethnography. He emailed me an essay by Pratt. I’m reading it now. Contact zones. “I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (Pratt 1). She talks about “...an *autoethnographic* text, by which I mean a text in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them” (2). Is that what I want to do? I want to offer intellectual stimulation in my own voice. If you want to call this approach autoethnographic, you have to understand autoethnography as a

transaction between perspectives. I'm representing myself in Broussard to you. I am probably part of the dominant culture interpreting a population in the aftermath of slavery. There's definitely a contact zone. So maybe that's what I take from Pratt.

The fact is that a little theory SHOULD inform what we do in the world—especially if we're teachers and learners. The fact is that the world really can become a better place, a more harmonious and colorful place. Blake has made me think about other perspectives, about events as transactions. He has suggested forgiveness, even to the self for its selfishness. No tail-eating snake. Forgiveness. These Bud Lights are going down so dreadfully quick.

I am a graduate student. White, male. One of my parents went to college—to a junior college on a football scholarship. He married a cheerleader whom he impregnated. They had two sons—Michael and Scott—then she went back to live with her family in Virginia instead of dealing with location changes caused by my dad's new career in insurance. Divorce. He married someone else and had three more kids—Hal Jr., Billy, and Kim. Divorce. Then you can look at a picture of nine kids, ages 1 to 21. I'm the baby on Hal Jr.'s shoulder. Long before crack-cocaine. My mom had been a secretary in my dad's office when they met; she was thirteen years younger than he and had three daughters—Sundi, Erin, and CJ. Here's what we were. A bizarro Brady bunch. I went to private elementary school and grew up in Dunwoody, GA. It occurs to me that it was a pretty nice house. Then we moved into a really nice old house in Summit, NJ. The rich kids in this town made me not feel rich. My dad would always say, "We're *not* rich." And "we're upper middle class." That always sounded good to me. My brothers and sisters all living weird lives, tensions between them and my parents, mostly about choosing not to attend college, which was offered to all of them. –Man, this contributes nothing, but I just want to pause and say it's so beautiful out here on this back porch. Louisiana gets you with its profusion of blooming flowers.

Yellow ones over there on that lush, draping vine, magenta and white butterfly bush crawling over the cream blooms of some other thing. The faint scent of my just-ripening arm pit. The tinny sound of obscure lo-fi pop-punk from the early nineties on laptop speakers. Anyway, I was going to say that theory should give us perspective. It should widen and deepen our understandings of things. Like I should consider the concept that all thinking is corporeal and that the language with which I think doesn't exist separately from my material being. Dude this is rambling garbage and totally indicative of the fact that writing should occur in the morning!!!!

But I should mention that the link to the story in the *Advocate* about the magnet program at Satsuma, with my quotes, being posted by the LSU Department of English on facebook, how it makes me feel so proud, how it makes me think of my dad, who would have been *so* proud. I would have been able to detect his happiness. "This... Is EXCELLENT." He would say. And how no one's back-patting could ever fill this void. Maybe Leo's some day, but that seems like a set up for heartbreak. It's your dad that loves you. It's the son that breaks the father's heart.

You're gonna get better, Dad. I'll see you in a couple weeks, OK?

Thanks. Thanks for coming. (The last words my dad said to me.)

May and Beyond

Wednesday, May 1, 2013

So I'm sitting here putting together a Prezi for the faculty of Broussard Parish. This is meant to instruct them on what "blended learning" is and how to utilize it in the parish. So this raises a couple issues. What I give them is meant to directly influence their teaching methodology. I've never been a high school teacher, so this is a challenge. I would say that I need to do my research and get everything right, but Freire has taught me and Fecho has taught me that if I want to really teach teachers something, I should use an inquiry-based method rather

than a banking method. This Prezi alone will *not* suffice. To properly generate knowledge, we MUST have an event or series of events in which we—the teachers, the parents, the administration, the central office, and I—can dialogue about this.⁵³

I'm having a hard time writing. I feel distractions creeping and pooling around the corners of my consciousness.

Sunday, May 12, 2013

Mother's Day. Mom started crying on the phone. When she says, "You're sweet to call me," it makes me feel badly. She said she got "locked in" to some old movie. She always talks about it being "so quiet." She plays really loud spa music on her iPhone when she goes to sleep. Like, really loud. Because she's deaf in one ear, to begin with. I've noticed that her hearing is worsening. She knows it, too. She's tried a few hearing aids. She didn't want any of them. Sometimes I can tell she hasn't heard what I've said, but she's pretty good at masking her slight impairment. She says she only sits with her right ear to someone she's conversing with.

What I wanted to write about was the story of sons turning away from corrupt fathers in order to come of age or find redemption. I'm watching *The Campaign*, a screwball comedy starring Will Ferrell and Zach Galifinakas. That's what I'm transacting with right now. It's like this. Galifinakis plays an effeminate mayor being willfully puppeted by external forces to become congressman for the 14th district of North Carolina. Very early, we realize his main incentive to enter the control of an uber-masculine, black leather wearing, phallic-looking, campaign manager is to win the respect and attention from his so-far-always-only-disappointed father, a senior uber-masculine patriarch of an estate, and who formerly served as something-or-

⁵³ No such meetings occur.

other having to do with Dick Cheney. I REALLY did not think I would be writing anything about this movie. It's Sunday around noon, and I've been straight chillaxing.

So Galifinakis's character gets swept up into this campaign, starts losing sight of What's Really Important (family), starts becoming less effeminate, more under the control of the penis man. When a political opponent sleeps with his wife, Galifinakis shoots the man while wearing full camo hunting gear, using a camo hunting rifle. This display of Orcian masculinity is what finally catches his father's attention, and Wins His Approval. His Dad: "I'm only saying this because I've had about a dozen Melanies [refers to his giant swirling glass] and a bump of coke, and I'm a little emotional. Goddamnit, I'm so proud of you. You actually shot a man and went up in the poles! That's something we've only dreamed about."

"Well, I would have shot somebody a long time ago, if I knew you'd be proud of me, Dad."

This caught my attention because I think that screwball comedy is still such a prominent source of morality in narrative media. It's still the old fable. You don't get invited to have an in-brain heteroglossiastic discussion by action movies or most horror movies. But farces like this still raise serious issues and actually do give you some theory on which to base future action. These is an ethical transaction that takes place in screwball comedies like this. I'm interested in why it makes us feel good to see sons depart from fathers. I think it's because it gives you a sense of hope about the world. If we're too rigid, we know we won't progress as a society. I think we know this within our cells. We inherently want to be good adapters and transformers and survivors. So it makes a deep sense for a reader to be presented with a conflict and tension and to desire resolution and for that resolution to involve, oftentimes, the departure of a son from a father, liberation from rigidity, imagination and change.

But this is where the general gets disrupted by the minute particular. And the personal conflicts with the general. The tempestuous place of “It’s OK for those kids but not MY kids.” The place where there’s what you want for everyone and what you want for yourself. The place where there’s what you should do according to your beliefs and what you actually do. The pizza or the kale. Praxis or selfish action. This is Albion. Where Jerusalem and Ulro are always in states of becoming.

Wednesday, June 5, 2013

1:03 p.m.

Breathing hard. Shaky. Hair’s messed up. Quiver in my breathe. Muscles aglow. Biceps twitch. Electric. This is why Whitman had to say electric. All the stuns, twitches, ticks: normal electric body stuff. My breath slows a little. Panic settles a little. Writing to calm down, concentrate. Writing to find a home. Vision goes blurry and face hangs heavy. Breath slows but heart pounds.

Digression: My Future Praxis

I do, in fact, want to be an education consultant. I believe it’s the perfect marriage of positive praxis and selfhood for me. My mom says on the phone: “Money’s nice. It’s nice to have a lot of money. I mean, not too much, but...” and that seems to be pretty solid wisdom. I’ve been enabled to do this work in part because of the efforts of my dad and mom to bring financial health to the family. I want Sarah to be able to go to college finally. I want be able to support Leo’s desire to be anything he wants to be. I know that not everyone has had the help I’ve had. My parents had recently been giving us a couple hundred dollars per month to help us afford a larger place to accommodate the coming baby. My parents wanted it to be nice for the baby. And they could afford it. My dad previously didn’t give me any money, but, for just one example,

when there was an \$800 dollar service needed for our car, Dad footed the bill. He kept life easier. Is easier better? Quite possibly not. But also quite possibly fuck yes. People who have had more of a financial struggle in their pursuit to a PhD have my admiration. People don't like to think their struggle has gone unnoticed—they want occasional recognition, which is completely understandable and not selfish or babyish. Virtual school is not a bad thing if done ethically. As a consultant, I'll make positive changes, stir things up, cause some apocalypses. I could do way more good than I could as a teacher. Especially if I build my own service and sell, along with efficiency and practicality, high-quality technology implementation, my philosophy. Selling my philosophy. Naming my philosophy. Conversion Ethics.

This is what's appropriate for my education level and personality and desired work. To continue doing exactly what I am doing—proposing and planning and developing virtual schools and training faculty in classroom flipping.

Thursday, July 18, 2013

The other day, Roger posted a Meme on Facebook. His caption was “So sad, so true.” The meme was composed of a female in a suit pointing to a blank chart. The caption: “This chart represents the teaching experience of most people making decisions about education.”

This after I—a person who has never taught public school—posted a video of Sir Ken Robinson's Ted Talk about rethinking the educational system. My caption was, “We need to develop curricula that accommodates kids who don't like sitting still rather than changing the chemistry of their brains.” Really trying to establish myself as someone with informed opinions about educational reform.

Reading Roger's post made me consider the following: I think a lot of research, a lot of GOOD research, could make it justifiable for me to help make decisions about education. I think

that teachers aren't even the only ones who should be able to make decisions about education. But I also realized this: That, for teachers, if I don't have any actual teaching experience, I won't have much credibility. It will be tough to get buy in from teachers. In a strategic sense, I should get at least a year of teaching experience. Only good could come from it, although it will be hard. That's part of it. Plus I love teaching. It's easier to just say "Actually I do have teaching experience" rather than making the complex (although true) argument that I don't necessarily need teaching experience to make decisions about education. So it might be best for me to get at least one year of teaching public school under my belt. Even though it would be a pain in the ass.

Wednesday, July 31, 2013

I went out to Satsuma Elementary to meet with the principal, Allison Christie, today. She told me that so far there would be thirty to thirty-five new students entering the magnet school from other school zones. So thirty-five students who would otherwise have gone to Broussard Elementary or another poorly performing elementary school will now go to Satsuma and take part in the curriculum themed around swamp culture. Christie says the inaugural cultural project will be a cookbook representing local family recipes. Math assignments involving measurements; reading assignments about food and things like crawfish; art assignments; sales pitches for the community; reports about field trips and guest speakers: These represent the types of assignments that will revolve around the production of the cookbook.

Allison was going off about the impossibility of meeting state/national requirements for proficiency, saying it was disgusting, talking about the difficulty of wanting to help all children learn the best they can while protecting teachers from the sanctions imposed because of NCLB if their students don't score high enough on standardized tests. If a teacher doesn't achieve proficiency (based on student scores, etc, whether they're on assisted lunch, etc) three years in a

row, then their licensure is revoked. And a principal can have her principal's license AND her teacher's license revoked "lickity split." Her word again: "disgusting."

I went out to North Broussard. The bayou looked still and refreshing. The sugar cane was high and menacing. I thought of Christie Diaz. I noticed a house for sale that backed up into the bayou. Dreamin.

The halls of old North Broussard High School/MSA-North Virtual were now coated in fresh purple and gray paint. The carpet had been replaced with tile or laminate or whatever that magnet type stuff is called. The pink linoleum countertops had been replaced with gray ones.

Monday, September 9, 2013

I looked back at the online article that was written in *The Advocate* about the conversion of Satsuma to a magnet school. I see that someone has used the comment function. The comment is now part of the record, part of the article. Here it is:

1) Comment by Iamhopeful2 - 04/23/2013

Schools of Choice - a myth. This program should be open to ALL students.

Nothing more than re segregation of the public school system brought about in desperation as result of 'reforms' designed to place a many [sic] students and schools in a failing category. The public will probably buy this based on the sales job they will be given. When will taxpayers demand their public schools be returned to them and that ALL students be equitably served.

The above comment indicts all the right people. In fact, it's some of the pithiest writing on education reform I've encountered after months of reading. It brings up the important issues of school choice (What does "myth" mean in this context?); eligibility and exclusivity; the desperation of school districts under what the author self-consciously terms "reforms"; the

possible intentionality behind accountability protocols that damage public schools; the arbitrariness of the concept of “failing”; the danger of categorization; lament at the tendency of “the public” to “buy” into ideas and concepts sold to them; the invocation of financial motivations in school reform; but there is also a little hope in the rhetorical affirmation that taxpayers have purchase, the implication that if people were to kind of wake up and collaborate in asserting their power, they can have their public schools back. The author implies that educational equity is desired both by the individual and community as a whole. This gets to the heart of what this study is about. The place where personal and public merge, if only momentarily. The relationship between self-interest and public interest.

This rich and pithy invective begs the question: Is the introduction of the magnet program at Satsuma Elementary unjust? Does it tilt social momentum towards Ulro? Is it “nothing more than a re segregation of the public school system?”

Maybe. To be considered for admittance into the program, there are GPA and, more importantly, standardized test score requirements. The implementation of NCLB put pressure on me to write guidelines that were not inherently democratic. Any first grader who’s been influenced to behave badly, or who hasn’t been influenced at all, who hasn’t gotten help learning to read at home is at a disadvantage. With the highest achieving kids leaving Broussard Elementary, the kids who haven’t been able to do as well are left behind, at a school now identified as the “bad” school. If it were a lottery system, all kids could at least have a fighting chance to receive a better elementary education. And the principal of Satsuma knows it. She said that it makes her sick to have to conform to the rules of NCLB. There’s too much at stake: Her teachers risk losing licensure; she risks losing licensure. The VAM scores determine everything. Is it reasonable to expect her to self-sacrifice and sacrifice the jobs of her teachers? I think it is

unreasonable. I mean, you can't expect people to be like that—that's why we make and love movies about heroes who self-sacrifice, like Michelle Pfeiffer and Hilary Swank.

The commenter's qualm seems to be with the admission requirements for students not already zoned to the school. According to the commenter's logic, the admission requirements represent a "re segregation of the public school system": Therefore, there's an assumption that this program would pull white students away from other schools. The commenter believes that the school district, or school system as a whole is "in desperation," because of "reforms" (scare quotes) "designed to place...many students and schools in a failing category." The commenter, I think, is suggesting that the system of accountability brought on by NCLB was "designed" to categorize "many" students and indeed entire schools as "failing." The interesting thing here is that the commenter sees this categorization not as an unsavory, accidental side-effect but as the prime purpose for accountability. The commenter notes a disconnect between her/his opinion and the general public opinion, suggesting that "the public" will "buy" the idea of the magnet elementary school "based on the sales job" that they will be given: A sales job largely given by two entities—Superintendent Arceneaux and myself.

I think of Arceneaux whispering in my ear at the community meeting at North Broussard.

What does the commenter mean when s/he expresses a desire for "public schools" to be "returned" to "taxpayers" and for "ALL students" to "be equitably served?" How does the commenter perceive that public schools have somehow been taken away from taxpayers? Is s/he referring to decisions about schools made without parental consent? Is this the concerned parent of a student at Broussard Elementary? I'm interested in the application of the phrase "sales job." This calls the corporate style reform Ravitch critiques to mind and raises the ever present

question: to what extent are market-based solutions useful for improving education, for creating more equitable education?

SECTION 5. PERFORMING INSTABILITY

Rogers writes that “Praxis is the intentional movement that actualizes a prerogative and simultaneously constitutes ‘new’ possibilities” (156). Performative critical writing enables “new possibilities.” As such, it has been my goal to do with this scholarship what a traditional critical study typically does not—to create experiential knowledge.

As with many of the most useful and relevant theoretical paradigms of recent decades like cultural studies, performance studies, reader response, and deconstruction, performative writing resists reduction. Instead, it expands under scrutiny, and this is a good litmus test for its efficacy as a praxis-enabling scholarly tool. Therefore, in Section II, I offered a survey of scholarly thought about performative writing not to reduce it but to educate my readers and myself about the broad landscape of critical scholarship, to participate in larger efforts to validate personal experience and creativity as important knowledge-producing things, and to challenge rigid notions of what scholarship should look like, in order to promote the connection of the personal to the public.

The documentary section has performed my argument, inspired by Blake, Freire, and others, for the development of a critical consciousness of the forces that conspire to keep us from liberating ourselves *from* ourselves, our empathy from our fear and self-concern. Blake’s “illuminations,” with their length and relentless, repetitious imagery of the Spectre, who embodies self-protective fear, isolation, and hatred of the Other, inspires the reader’s repeated self-reflection. Because his readers *participate* in the generation and application of the meanings that emerge from problems posed to us by Los, aspects of the Blakean worldview resonate. Blake’s mythopoeia, viewed as a whole, is a “story that can be used.” One important lesson from

Blake is that directing energy of our self-interest into things that are beneficial for others may be a way to collaboratively make the world better, more liberated, less atrocious.

One way I've tried to make performative writing my praxis is through constant interruption. Abrupt changes in voice and subject matter were meant to perform the destabilization of any stable authorial identity. Performing instability is meant to convey through form that people are fluid states of energetic relation. We are changeable.

My imagined, constantly changing visions of the future interspersed through Section IV also perform this destabilization of the self over time. This is the first step, I believe, in creating the sense of social metonymy necessary for radical change toward a better educational world. We de-unify the self, and pave the way for conveying the not-always-welcome facts of our interconnectedness, down to the material, microbial level. We are superorganisms, not unified selves. We can't escape each other—we *are* each other. Isolation is an illusion. We should exchange ideas like we exchange germs. The abrupt images of hypothetical progressive charter schools demonstrates, I hope, how the future is the playground of the imagination, and the imagination is the most important faculty for a social trajectory that leads towards liberation.

In the narrative of Blake's *Jerusalem*, self-interest finally wins. The Spectre devours Los. But, we realize, the production of his imaginative, educative work means a final victory for the force of social liberation. We understand Blake's most important lesson through inference: The educative art object that connects you to others, lets you see through their eyes, is the best kind of teacher, Blake seems to imply. My argument is that performative, creative scholarship grounded in the real world, that seeks to inspire through the intellect as well as the heart, that seeks to form a bond through knowledge-generating transactions, can also be an effective kind of work.

From January until May 2013, I navigated what seemed like a constantly churning ethical landscape, trying to determine what, if any, kind of education is best for children, while trying to envision a way I could achieve success in a capitalistic society. I felt swayed each time I read or transacted with someone with a strong opinion. It was the experience of an interested neophyte, and I came to see that the vast majority of us are neophytes when it comes to educational issues. This should be a concern, since education is one of the most impactful institutions of society. The feasibility of a liberated world depends on how and how well we educate children. If you care about the youth, about their future without you, about the very course of humankind, then you should be cognizant of what's going on in education reform. That's what I learned from this experience. Everyone should be able to talk about things like what quality education means.

I hope I have inspired a realistic view of educational reform that comes from a realistic view of the human self. Generally speaking, self-interest guides us. But through the faculty of the imagination we understand that humanity is one. Therefore, what's best for others can often be in our self-interest, too. Apply this logic to the current state of education in the United States. So many children and young adults are being neglected, willfully ignored. A worldview marshaled by a sense of social metonymy might warn that if only for-profit entities are paying attention to problems in the efficacy of public education, education could change in a way that only benefits those for-profit entities. The more public schools that “fail,” the more money and power gets absorbed into gigantic corporations like Pearson. The more bombings and public shootings that take place—the more fear that soaks into the imaginations of U.S. voters—the more private educational companies will profit. It's a huge market that thrives on fear. *My Spectre, chained to a rock, stops his blubbery, opens his eyes, and cracks a smile. I can see it reflected in the cracks of my windshield.*

And yet, the economic boost of my spring as an educational consultant is long-over, and my little family's expenses just keep increasing. The money is absent, along with the emotional security it temporarily provided, and there is only a void left in its place. I see the private education market for the dangerous thing that it is. I see its corruption. Yet, if they paid me enough...

I've already done it, after all. I was delivered \$15,000 (an impossibly grand sum for a graduate student) to sell a school board on a plan to purchase online courseware that would replace traditional school for however many students the district could convince. Marketing plans, emails, phone calls, billboards. Why are they being used? To increase "attendance" at this virtual school. Why is that a priority? District ranking. The management feels that using EdGenuity will allow for the firing of teachers in some instances, saving the district money and ridding them of what they perceive to be the biggest reason for their low performance numbers: Teachers. Bad teachers, who are very difficult to fire.

I don't know how to "save" Broussard Parish. But I'm not sure that virtual school will do anyone any good. And I'm not sure that creating a district-wide school choice program will help in the long term. Perhaps one problem with the current movement toward schools of choice is that people creating and passing legislation about education policy are not educated in what education is supposed to accomplish.

John Dewey argued that the classroom should be thought of as a microcosm of society at large. He wrote strongly in favor of collaboration over competition. He argued that curricula should involve plenty of new activities that would foster teamwork and solidarity between students. For Dewey, merely giving students lessons and tasks fostered only competition, leading to antisocial behavior and attitudes. Projects, active learning, things like cooking, gardening, and

woodworking would help students learn to work together and communicate in a model of deliberative democracy (Nasaw 104). Dewey, like Blake, saw learning as integral to a better societal state, one in which people talk to each other, respect each other, learn from each other, work together.

Lisa Delpit also envisions a more liberated society, as she laments the way that NCLB has reduced education to test preparation in a way that ignores the responsibility of a society to nourish its youth: “We in education have allowed politicians to push us to act as if the most important goal of our work is to raise test scores. Never mind the development of the human beings in our charge—the integrity, the artistic expressiveness, the ingenuity, the persistence, or the kindness of those who will inherit the earth—the conversation in education has been reduced to a conversation about one number” (xiv). Does this sound Blake’s Ulro to you? Where everything is reduced to surfaces and representations, and competition is privileged over cooperation.

Deborah Meier has similar ideas about the kind of public education we should envision for our youth. She writes that “If we agree that what we want are citizens with a lively curiosity—who ask, How come? and, Why? and, Is it truly so?—we’ll have the start of a new definition of ‘well-educated.’ How about being closely *observant*, prepared to keep one’s eyes and ears open for patterns, for details, for the unusual? Schooling should encourage *playfulness*—the capacity to imagine, to wonder, to put things together in new and interesting ways—as well as the possession of a *skeptical and open mind*. To be in the habit of *imagining how others think*, feel, and see the world—in the habit of stepping into the shoes of others—should surely be one of our new basics” (Meier 170).

School reform has been around since the idea of public schooling was first introduced in the nineteenth century. During the past century and a half, many of the reform movements have purported to offer access to education to disadvantaged populations, while often these reforms were designed to keep social order and pacify these same populations. Nasaw ends his book, *Schooled to Order*, with the hopeful comment that self-interested reformers have never been able to *fully* implement their plans to oppress the majority of our society's youth. But that was in the late 1970s. Since No Child Left Behind, can we retain that hope?

Many brilliant educational theorists and practitioners rightfully think that the NCLB Act is yet another example of what Freire calls "false generosity." It purports to provide aid to low-income schools and to effect improvement in teacher performance, and to give parents the ability to save their children from failing schools through school choice, while it leads public education toward privatization. There is a lot of money to be made in this emerging market, and entrepreneurs are already starting to capitalize in significant ways on the new opportunities. *You're an entrepreneur*. Meanwhile, struggling public schools face sanctions and are closing left and right, leaving parents and students to figure out how to get any kind of formal education. Often, this involves bussing students absurdly long distances to neighborhood schools that have yet to be closed. That virtual school owned by Pearson starts sounding pretty good, given the lack of options.

Speculation about the "true" aims of NCLB aside, it's clear that under the current system, the quality of a school, of a teacher, of a principal is reduced to how well their students do on standardized tests. Even if some degree of accountability is good, which it is, and even if good assessments can be beneficial for a school's health, should we really place such high stakes on these assessments? In the short term, those students who perform the lowest, and who are

therefore in the greatest need of help from teachers, are forced out of schools one way or another by administrators who see it as their duty to protect their teachers from being fired and protecting their communities from losing another school. Struggling students put teachers' jobs at risk under NCLB.

The popular perception is that charter schools are basically a good thing in the world. What I learned from my daily experiences and research, however, is that this optimistic opinion is overly simplistic. In actuality, the emphasis on accountability and choice, brought on by the NCLB Act, which has made charter schools a viable option for parents who want to avoid sending their children to public schools, may have deleterious effects on public education as a whole. It turns out that accountability and choice, and the legislation that is created according to readings of accountability and choice, represent a complex web of issues about education, and most of it really comes down to the how much people are willing to compromise the interests of their own families for the sake of the "big picture." And then there's the question of how much having a family to support is just an excuse to let down one's guard against the ever-whispering Spectre.

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APPENDIX

**Application for:
Approval of Projects Which Use Human Subjects**

This application is used for projects/study's that cannot be reviewed through the exemption process.



Institutional Review Board
Dr. Robert Mathews, Chair
203 B-1 David Boyd Hall
Baton Rouge, LA 70803
P: 225.578.8692
F: 225.578.6792
irb@lsu.edu | lsu.edu/irb

- Applicant, Please fill out the application in its entirety and include two copies of the completed application as well as parts A-E, listed below. Once the application is completed, please submit it to the IRB Office for review and please allow ample time for the application to be reviewed. Expedited review usually takes 1-2 weeks. Full reviews are held at the bimonthly IRB meetings 2nd week of Feb. Apr, June, Aug, Oct, Dec. Carefully completed applications should be submitted 2 weeks before a meeting to ensure a prompt decision.
- A Complete Application Includes All of the Following:
 - (A) Two copies of this completed form and two copies of parts B thru E.
 - (B) A complete copy of any grant proposal relevant to the project.
 - (C) Copies of all instruments to be used.
 - If this proposal is a part of a grant application, include a copy of the grant proposal, the investigative brochure (if one exists) and any recruitment materials including advertisements intended to be seen or heard by potential subjects.
 - (D) The consent form that will be used. A copy of the Waiver of Signed Informed Consent is attached and must be completed only if there is the intention to use an unsigned consent form. The **script to be used as the unsigned consent script MUST be included** with the waiver of signed informed consent.
 - (E) Certificate of Completion of Human Subjects Protection Training for all personnel involved in the project, including students who are involved with testing or handling data, unless already on file with the IRB. Training link <http://cme.cancer.gov/clinicaltrials/learning/humanparticipant-protections.asp>.

1) Principal Investigator*: Susan Weinstein Rank: Associate Professor
 *PI must be an LSU Faculty member
 Dept.: ENGLISH Ph: 8-7880 E-Mail: sweinst@lsu.edu

2) Co Investigator 1 **: Thomas Sowders Rank: Doctoral Student
 **Student? Y/N Y Thesis/dissertation/class project? Y/N Y
 Dept.: ENGLISH Ph: 919-720-7271 E-Mail: tsowder1@tiger.lsu.edu

3) All other Co Investigators: please include department, rank, and e-mail for each

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Complete Application <input type="checkbox"/> Human Subjects Training	IRB# <u>E8200</u> SU Proposal# <input type="checkbox"/> Full <input type="checkbox"/> Expedited
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4) Project Title: Blended Learning and the Quest to Change Iberville Parish

5) Proposed Start Date: 02/2013 6) Proposed Duration Months: 12

7) Number of Subjects Requested: 20 8) LSU Proposal# _____

9) Funding Sought From: n/a

Study Exempted By:
 Dr. Robert C. Mathews, Chairman
 Institutional Review Board
 Louisiana State University
 203 B-1 David Boyd Hall
 225-578-6692 | www.lsu.edu/irb
 Exemption Expires: 3/5/2016

Incomplete applications will not be processed. Effective August 1, 2007, incomplete applications will only be kept on file for two years.

exempted category 1
Mathews *Robert Mathews*

VITA

Tom Sowders grew up in Atlanta and spent most of his teenage years in the North Carolina piedmont. He graduated from East Chapel Hill High School in 1999. After a few years in New York City and New Orleans, Tom moved back to North Carolina and attended North Carolina State University, where he studied English and creative writing.

After graduating in 2004, Tom moved to Atlanta and worked in the insurance business before fleeing to the shores of North Carolina and earning a Master's degree in English from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. Somewhere in there he was a carrier for the U.S. Postal Service. While studying at UNCW, Tom wrote extensively on the poetry of Wallace Stevens and later published his Master's Thesis, titled *Wallace Stevens' Girls*.

Tom began his doctoral coursework at Louisiana State University in the fall of 2009. In addition to teaching courses in composition, literature, and poetry, Tom presented scholarly work at regional and national conferences. In his fourth year at LSU, Tom applied for a new program in partnership with Broussard Parish Schools. His new tasks included designing a virtual public school, writing guidelines for the conversion of an elementary school into a magnet school, tutoring high school students in test-taking strategies, and giving individualized instruction to students enrolled in the virtual school he designed. In 2014, Tom moved back to North Carolina, where he lives with his wife and son.