

# Deep Reading, Deep Learning

Deep Reading Volume 2

*Edited by*

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## CHAPTER 12

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# Reading in Slow Motion

—*Richard E. Miller*

Last year, over the holidays, I got to spend some time with my two-year-old niece. There was a lot of family around, all the usual hubbub. When I think back to the get-together, two images of how reading has changed in just the past five years come immediately to mind. First, there's my niece with an iPad and headphones on, punching the icons, pulling up episode after episode of *Barney*. For her, the screen opens out onto a bottomless archive of visual material, and navigating that material is as natural and as obvious as pointing at what you want. You point and the world responds.

The other image is of six people sitting on an L-shaped couch, ages ranging from thirteen to early sixties. Each person has an electronic device in hand; each person is focused entirely on the screen. Each person is engaged in one kind of reading or another: finger scrolling through e-mail on a smartphone, checking on text messages, skimming the *New York Times*, immersed in a novel on an e-book, and my nephew playing a video game that involves building cities for Lego robots. Every page that gets turned during the hours everyone spends with their devices gets turned with the swipe of a finger. Quietly, and without anyone quite having noticed, paper has ceased to be the assumed final destination for thought. If what you are writing and thinking is not destined for a screen, it might as well not exist. That is to say, going forward, digital reading will be the norm and reading printed matter on paper will be a niche market activity.

Whether one embraces this change or decries it, the fact remains that it is well under way and that it is irreversible (barring a global cataclysm).

And what does this mean for teachers of reading? Many things, but the most pressing issue is learning how to read when distractions of every variety are not only immanently present in the screen's keyboard but also manifest on screen, atop the very text one is reading—as text messages, chat requests, or notifications from Facebook or Twitter or some preferred news source. What does it mean to read a text that sinks into the background as soon as the reader gives in to any whim or fancy?

*Table 1. Aspects of the reader-writer relationship: print-centric versus network-centric paradigms paradigm*

|              | Print-Centric           | Network-Centric  |
|--------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| Writer       | Isolated                | Connected        |
| Audience     | At a distance/a fiction | Present/embodyed |
| Publication  | Slow                    | Immediate        |
| Distribution | Regional                | Global           |
| Information  | Scarce                  | Ubiquitous       |
| Mastery      | Content                 | Resourcefulness  |

When I lecture about the profound consequences of the shift from paper to screen, invariably someone will say that I overstate the case. If we look to the history of the book, the skeptic will say, we can see early codex writing as a clear precedent for the experience of reading on the screen. And sometimes I get someone who will say, yawning, "Oh, but hasn't it ever been thus, the aged looking on the ways of the young with shock?" These are the stock responses of flat earthers. It makes no difference to them that the Gutenberg printing press could not instantly distribute its Bibles globally or that, in the wink of an eye, Chelsea Manning transferred top-secret documents to *Wikileaks* and viewers worldwide were then able to watch a live recording of US soldiers firing indiscriminately from a helicopter down into the streets of New Baghdad, killing over a dozen people, including two Reuters journalists.

As Table 1 demonstrates, every aspect of the reader-writer relationship has been transformed by the shift from paper to screen. That is not a value judgment. That is not a statement of approval or celebration. That is a fact.

When I was in college thirty years ago, there were two places you could go for information: the library and the professor. Now, more information is available to me via my smartphone than any single library has ever contained, and not just information stored as text but information encoded in lectures and slideshows, vast archives of photographs, and millions upon millions of leaked classified documents. Information is everywhere, and as the idealist slogan from the sixties has it, it *wants* to be free.

What does this mean for our professor, who once was the library's mobile memory drive? When information was scarce, schooling involved getting the information out of the library and into the students' heads, with the professor doing double duty as the conduit for the flow of information and the quality control manager. The professor was granted the podium by virtue of documented mastery of the scarce content—not blind acts of memory, mind you, but a proven ability to organize and retain the relevant information and then to communicate that sense of order to the students.

With information ubiquitous, it is no longer possible to master a content area; there is too much content and the standard area demarcations cannot hold because the content will not stay put. The student can access more information about Hamlet's soliloquy than any single professor could ever retain: there is the scholarship, of course, but also all the film versions, available via YouTube; podcast lectures; the online resources at the Globe Theatre; and paper mill student essays for every occasion. The professor's role in this new digital learning environment is not to play the part of the master of content; it is to be the master of resourcefulness. In this role, the teacher models how to think in the face of an endless torrent of information, most of which is nothing more than the noise of self-publication and self-promotion. With a digital printing press in every phone and in every networked computer, the screen is always waiting with some new distraction.



There is no single appropriate response to this fundamental change in the experience of literacy. As I have come to better understand the full significance of this change over the past few years, I have been approaching the challenge of developing a pedagogical practice responsive to these changed times in two complementary ways: I teach highly mediated, immersive courses in composing idea-driven visual essays, and I regularly teach a course I call Reading in Slow Motion, where students spend an entire semester reading one book-length work of nonfiction. I have taught Reading in Slow Motion to entering students, to returning students, to final-semester seniors. I have yet to teach a student who had extensive experience reading with care or who thought of reading itself as an intimate experiencing of another's thoughts. Reading as downloading, main-point gleaning, bullet-point grabbing, gist getting, plot summarizing, yes; reading as an unrestricted zone for anything-goes interpretation, yes; reading as the act of identification and gratification, yes. But reading as the creation of a mental space for deliberation, speculation, reflection, meditation, no.

Can you learn to read without rereading? Can you learn how to think without experiencing thought? Reading in Slow Motion is convened with the specific goal of making time for students to have the embodied *experience* of learning. Content is everywhere. Information is ubiquitous, but the ability to focus, to follow a long argument, to know something in depth all seem to be out of reach. If we lose this educational opportunity, then we could well end up in "The Shallows," where the top Google hit is the unquestioned truth, *Wikipedia* is the only source, and understanding and insight have been entirely replaced by factoids, viral tweets, and the twenty-four-minute news cycle. While all these negative outcomes may seem inevitable, it is certainly possible that, if we capitalize on this opportunity, we could end up gaining access to at least some of the cognitive surplus that previous generations squandered watching *Hogan's Heroes*.

The only thing that is certain is that the Internet does not care about the outcome. Nor does the hammer. As always, the tools have their ears covered.

The Five Rules of Reading in Slow Motion

- One book, fifteen to twenty pages a week
- No reading ahead
- Meet once a week
- No technology in class

*What book?* For the course to work, I choose a work I do not know well, one with a project that interests me but that I do not endorse in advance. I am meant to be reading along with the students, according to the same rules, asking questions myself about where the argument is or might be going. I am not modeling what it is to know but, rather, how it is that one comes to know.

*Why no reading ahead?* The project is to read in slow motion, to attend to thought unfolding in time, to develop a sensitivity to nuance, to cultivate curiosity. All these goals are compromised by the performance of knowingness—mine or some eager student's. The point is not to know ahead of everyone else but to experience the drama of an idea coming together.

So, I say to the students, no matter how excited you have become about Susan Sontag's theory of representation, Thomas Paine's discussion of monarchy, Elaine Scarry's exploration of the relationship between aesthetics and justice, you're only to read X number of pages next week. And to understand the new pages, you are invited to *reread* the pages we have discussed this week and the pages from the weeks before that.

"Excited by Sontag's theory of representation" or any other example I offer seems an impossibility at the beginning of the course. What would it mean to be excited by an idea? What do readers who have been lit up by an idea do that distinguishes them from readers who are skimming, grinding it out, baffled, bored, preparing for a test, writing a paper?

A corollary to this rule is ~~that the~~ pace never quickens. There is no point when I say, well now, you have the gist of Sontag, or Paine, or Scarry, or whomever I teach next time, so read the next fifty pages, the next one hundred. Slow reading is no prolegomenon to skimming, nor is it reading with training wheels; it is a practice we practice for the whole semester.

*Why only one meeting a week?* The division of learning time into chunks of whatever length is an arbitrary affair. In the death march of time that was my high school education, it was every subject, five days a week. In college, most of my courses were four days a week for fifty minutes. When I started as a teaching assistant, it was three days a week for fifty minutes. At Rutgers, it's two eighty-minute classes. You can try to teach on Friday if you want, but most students elect to go to school Monday through Thursday, for obvious reasons. The utter incoherence of the elective curriculum, the bus system, a faceless student body, and a general indifference to timeliness: everything colludes to create meetings where everyone is half in the room, if they are there at all.

Serious learning requires sustained encounters with unknowing, ambiguity, frustration, boredom. One three-hour meeting, once a week, provides the time and space for such encounters. It gives us time to have silence stretch out after a difficult question, allows for reading a challenging passage together and then reading it again, makes room for all the essential ingredients for bringing ideas to life—spontaneity, digression, immersion.

*Why no technology in class?* Having said that the Internet is like gravity, isn't this requirement the equivalent of saying sessions will be held in deep space—a place infinitely distant from the lived realities that govern the students' reading?

No technology in class does not mean the students cannot use technology. In fact, with the entirely manageable weekly reading assignments (ten to fifteen pages, recall), there is ample time outside of class for the students to take advantage of the Internet's tremendous research power. When something is referenced in the reading that is unfamiliar, all the reader has to do is turn to the computer, type whatever has stalled the reading process—Plato's cave, Wittgenstein, the King James version of Judges—and see what happens. Getting started is that easy.

But in class, the search engine is a world away. It is an artificial constraint, surely, but one that is not so different, at least initially, from the self-imposed constraint students apply while reading for class: read once, come to class, see what happens. Don't know what Plato's cave is? Maybe the teacher will explain it. If not, it must not have been that important anyway.

There is a world of information out there just waiting to enrich, thicken, and complicate what is being read—inert information waiting to be set in motion by curiosity. And once the students get the hang of what reading in slow motion entails, they start to seek that information out, post their findings to our shared research site, come to class ready to talk about places where they got stuck, not because of an unfamiliar reference but because of the turn the argument took. But without the Internet there to provide that ready access to information in class, what remains in the classroom is the encounter of the reader with the words on the page.

Those first classes are remarkable. So, what did you think of the opening of *Common Sense*? Boring. The Sontag? Pretentious. The encounter with the words on the page seems to call for a judgment of some kind—of the experience of reading, in some cases; in others, of the author's writing style.

And after the judgment, silence.

Tick, tick.

Boring, is it?

Three hours is a long time, time not adequately filled by the observation: "I find political theory boring."

What follows from the determination that "X is boring"? Not much, which is why it is such a comfort. In *Reading in Slow Motion*, however, the work is not to settle on a judgment that brings the

reading to a close but, rather, to come to see reading itself as an expression of agency. To say the assigned reading is boring, in this context, is to say, "I don't know how to make what I am reading interesting."

With no technology in the classroom, limitless resources and distractions are both placed out of reach. What remains are the resources the readers bring with them to class and the mind's inclination to wander.

The students know how to decipher the words on the page; what they lack is experience moving out from those words to the host of possible contexts—real and imagined—that give those specific words weight and meaning. They know how to read; what they don't know how to do is to use reading as a tool for discovery.

What does the experience of discovery feel like? If we imagine the challenge of research to be, in the first instance, experiential rather than procedural, the work of the classroom changes. The pedagogy of research as procedure has remained virtually unchanged since I was a child. In tenth grade English, we were introduced to the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, note cards, the outline, and, of course, the engine of the entire enterprise: the research question. Research in this incarnation was a series of arbitrary requirements to be checked off: five sources, two from reputable academic journals, the others from book-length studies; this many pages, this many words per page; bibliography with the semicolon here not there. In this realm, the "research" "question" is just the force that frog-marches each writer to the inevitable encounter with the formula for equanimity: "While some think X and others think Y, on balance, it's best to think Z about fill-in-the-blank."

No one sets out to solicit a stack of vacuous, half-hearted ventures into the archive, but this is what procedural pedagogy generates. Real research has a different feel to it. But how to trigger this experience has been a challenge that has long bedeviled teachers of the research paper. How to ignite the flame?

We associate reading with privacy. Sitting in the library, in a favorite chair, on a crowded bus: in your own world. Students come to class to learn a higher form of literacy, to move from decoding to discovery, but the activity remains a mystery. Where did that come from? How did the teacher get *that* out of *those* words? Making the private act of reading public is one way to define the work of teaching and its fundamental challenge. Reading in Slow Motion starts with this challenge and stays with it for the entire semester.

Although this tool was not available when I started teaching Reading in Slow Motion, social bookmarking has proven to be immeasurably useful for addressing the two challenges I have been discussing: how to share the excitement of discovery and how to do a better job of teaching what is possible in the private realm of reading. I have used both Delicious.com and Diigo.com. Each functions in the same way: the teacher forms a group and invites the students to join; students then post to the site the resources they have discovered.

Proceeding in this way, week in and week out, the students use their writing to share resources and discoveries-in-the-making, with their teacher moving through the virtual space like a sheepdog, helping to guide concentration, focus, persistence—keeping things moving. Each week, some initiatives are more fruitful than others, some more valuable for the individual than the class as a whole, but it is never hard to tell whether the reading is triggering new thoughts: the quality of the questions posed in our three-hour sessions improves, as does the quality of the discussion. Thomas Paine may be boring, Susan Sontag pretentious, Elaine Scarry hard to follow, but because these initial impressions lead nowhere (the course is titled *Reading in Slow Motion*, not *Reading in Place*), the students have to develop new ways of engaging with what they are reading.

And just as social bookmarking has made it possible to move the acts of reading and of doing research into public, improvements in collaborative writing software now make it possible to share student writing in real time. Students use Google Docs and have access to each other's works in progress

and final drafts. All peer commenting is also visible to everyone. All in real time. Thus, from the moment the students take up their first writing assignment, they can see how their peers are making sense of their shared task.

In the Sontag class, the students were asked to place their experience with images into dialogue with a brief moment from "In Plato's Cave" (1997) where Sontag pauses in her work with abstractions to point to her first encounter with pictures from the concentration camps: "Nothing I have seen—in photographs or in real life—ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after, though it was several years before I understood fully what they were about" (20). This assignment was challenging in a way I had not anticipated. Fully half the class claimed to have no prior experience where an image exercised such disruptive power and opted to write about pictures that had been posted to the Diigo site earlier in the semester. Because they can embed the images directly into their documents, it becomes possible to see the range of choices at a glance, without reading a word: Emmet Till's cadaver, wet-suited boys swimming in Australia's "cappuccino sea," the Twin Towers' "falling man," starvation in the Sudan, the cover of a rap album, Jim Jones surrounded by devotees, Lady Gaga decked out in a Kermit the Frog outfit, and so on. And this strange catalogue, in turn, became a subject for us to discuss: with images everywhere, can images exercise the power Sontag fears? Or is the omnipresence of the image proof that Sontag's fears about the power of the image are now unwarranted?

Because we have been moving so slowly through Sontag, the students are positioned, perhaps for the first time in their lives, to consider their own experience in light of what they have read. We read their papers together and ask whether their experiences support any number of Sontag's assertions:

Taking photographs has set up a chronic voyeuristic relation to the world which levels the meaning of all events. (1997: 11)

To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. (15)

In these last decades, "concerned" photography has done at least as much to deaden conscience as to arouse it. (21)

Only that which narrates can make us understand. (23)

To write their papers, they have to begin to have a sense not only for Sontag's argument but also for what it means to think like Sontag. What in what she writes is nuance? Blindness? Provocation? Humor? What does she let drop? What ideas haunt her? What, in sum, are her habits of mind?

After the students have spent a semester of shadowing the author in these ways, pushing the ideas from one frame of reference to another and being pushed back in turn, correctly anticipating argumentative moves, reading past important qualifications and returning to get them only after their importance has made itself known retroactively, feeling the long argument come together and watching it fall apart: after this sustained encounter with a mind at work on a problem, the students are given the final assignment. And the final assignment brings with it the fifth rule.

### The Fifth Rule of Reading in Slow Motion

The final paper can be on anything ... except the assigned text.

Isn't this just deliberate contrarianism? The entire semester has been spent exploring how the assigned text can be made to lead to other worlds, other questions, getting a handle on how the assigned author organizes information, makes connections, sees around corners. But the course has not been about the great mind or about whether, at the end of it all, one finds the author's sustained meditation on X to be compelling. Thus, the work that remains is not Sontag: for or against? And it is not

photography: good or bad? Furthermore, because we now read in a world of information superfluity, it is not a question of organizing a mini-archive on Sontag (five sources, two from respected journals, etc.) for a final paper.

The work that remains is the work of the course: to use writing as a technology for thinking new thoughts, ideally thoughts the author feels compelled to share with others. Here is the final assignment, in part:

As we discussed at length two weeks ago in class, for your final assignment you are to put together an essay that *does* what we have seen Sontag do—an essay that meditates, speculates, deliberates, explores. The work of such an essay is to open a question up and to keep it open for as long as possible, so that connections between the question and other issues can come to light. Your final project will be assessed on what it *does*. Have you used your writing to extend your thinking? To explore complexity? To generate insight and understanding?

The only way to produce a successful response to this assignment is to write at the edge of one's understanding. The goal here is, doubtless, a familiar one; what I find differs about soliciting this kind of writing after a semester of reading in slow motion is that the students bring to the assignment their own experiences of having searched with an ever clearer sense of purpose. And this is an invaluable addition to a classroom that also moves through the procedures of brainstorming, peer feedback, drafting, and revising with real-time inline peer comments.

You might say the goal of the final assignment is to solicit prose that slows down, prose that rewards lingering and rereading.

As you might imagine, the final projects are all over the map. Like any other class, there are students who just fax it in and students who struggle mightily with the invitation to explore complexity. In other words, this ain't Dr. Jed's Pedagogical Lightning in a Bottle to cure all your teaching ills. Nevertheless, what I find most encouraging about the end of the semester—and the reason I continue to offer this course—is the earnestness with which the students as a whole take up the challenge to veer from the straight and narrow.

What do I look for when I am reading the final papers? The course has sought to do the following:

- Foster speculative, deliberative, meditative thought and writing
- Promote rereading, revision, research
- Provide student-generated examples of insight arising from sustained acts of attention

Typically, the questions the students want to tackle are gigantic—as big as trying to figure out the relationship between images and reality in contemporary society. The course has prepared the students with strategies for grounding such big questions in a series of manageable, if discordant, actualities. So, what is the source of compassionate feelings? Why is the sense of identity located in the face? Why is there a need to express identity at all? What idea of beauty, if any, animates works of abstract expressionism? Is social activism possible in virtual communities?<sup>1</sup>

Should you graduate from college without having tried to work with questions of this magnitude? Can you have a life of the mind if you have not experienced the discovery of new thoughts through your own initiative? Can you produce scholarship worth reading if you have not struggled to resist the allure of knowingness in favor of inquisitiveness?

<sup>1</sup> Most of the students in the Sontag course were graduating seniors. If you find yourself dissatisfied with the fact that, at the end of their collegiate careers, the questions they cared about most were questions of how to establish a sense of self in the world, it is worth wondering what in the major, in the other four to five to six years of coursework, prepared them to think beyond the self.

After the Sontag version of this course ended, I heard from one of the students in the course—he had revised his essay and submitted it to *Millions*, an online journal I had never heard of. After a little Googling, I discovered that *Millions* had published work by a host of writers and artists I greatly admire: Laurie Anderson, Jonathan Lethem, and Rick Moody, for example. And there was Sean Cooper's multimedia piece "Headphone Elegies" (2010) for all the world to see.

Cooper's meditation on music's ubiquity begins, serendipitously for our purposes, with Steve Almond decrying "our ever-expanding dial of distractions." In the nine sections that follow, each introduced by a playable embedded musical selection, Cooper explores how the ability to provide a running soundtrack for one's own life is more involved than Almond imagines. His essay references Oliver Sacks, Don DeLillo, Michel de Certeau, Jean Baudrillard, Wittgenstein, Schopenhauer. Is it also in dialogue with *The Gutenberg Elegies*?

It is not every day that a student publishes a multimedia essay written for school, but once the screen completely replaces the page as the assumed final destination for thought, the venues for publication will multiply beyond imagining, as will the possible forms of publication. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) began each chapter with a musical epigraph. While he could only allude to the sounds he was in conversation with in 1903, readers of his work now can hear the music he references, including two different versions of "My Lord, What a Morning," the hymn that precedes his opening statement in "Of the Dawn of Freedom": "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea." Readers of this online edition of *The Souls of Black Folk* can also review an 1874 version of the sheet music for "My Lord, What a Morning," as well as the words in English and in German.

Writers have long dreamed of being able to bring the other arts into the reading experience. Now that a laptop is a movie studio, a recording company, an atelier, a study, a publisher, and a global distributor all wrapped up in one, the act of composition has changed. How well prepared will our students be, as readers and as writers, to confront such a world? How well prepared are we?

\*\*\*\*\*

## Afterword: A Decade of Slow Reading (Written for This Volume)

—Richard E. Miller

My, how time slows!

In the fall of 2019, I taught Reading in Slow Motion for the sixth time. The rules outlined in my essay in *Pedagogy* haven't changed, but the world surrounding the course sure has. Even so, I continue to resist the urge to choose a text that is "relevant" or, worse yet, "relatable," despite the eminent threat of total social collapse, for reasons I hope to make clear below. But, for those of you in a hurry, here's the TL/DR version: Reading in Slow Motion is a course in paying attention, of quieting the chatter of the monkey mind so that complexity can emerge. This doesn't involve keeping the world and its problems out of the classroom; to the contrary, this is a practice that allows for multiple perspectives, nuance, ambiguity, contradiction; it is a practice for engaging with the unknown.

For the 2019 seminar, I chose Rebecca Solnit's *The Faraway Nearby*. The book met my criteria: it came highly recommended by a reader who understands the goals of Reading in Slow Motion; my

initial read confirmed it was the kind of text that rewards rereading and that models what's involved in thinking a "big thought;" and it was the right length (just over 200 pages). I announced the book in the course description, as well as my requirement that all students buy the paper version of the text. The description also made clear that no technology was allowed in class and that we would spend the bulk of our time together reading Solnit at a pace of 8 pages or so a session.

On the first day of class, I handed out Solnit's Table of Contents which, like her book title, offers no clue as to the book's subject. The book's thirteen one-word chapter titles are arranged to create a semi-circle stretching from the top to the bottom of the TOC's left margin. The first six chapters curve away from the left margin and the seventh chapter, entitled "Knot," is at the right margin. The remaining chapters, four of which share names with the first six chapters, curve back to the left margin.

We spent our first eighty minutes together discussing the thirteen numbered words in the TOC, their possible connections to one another, the repetitions, the shape. We zeroed in on the homonyms: breath and wound. We wondered whether "unwound" could also be homonym and, if so, whether it could retroactively determine the pronunciation of "wound." Is there a thread that winds its ways through Solnit's chapters until it knots in the middle and then unwinds back to the beginning?

And the shape? What is it? One arm, akimbo? A boomerang? A bird in flight? And what does any of this have to do with "the faraway, nearby," whatever that might be or mean?

\*

It's not uncommon for there to be a loss of 20% in class enrolment after the first meeting.

\*

With the first couple of pages under our belts for the next session, we are on our way, following Solnit as she faces the problem of what to do with the enormous mound of apricots from her mother's tree, sent on to her by her brother after their mother had been moved into assisted living. It doesn't take long before Solnit uses those apricots to raise questions about the self, memory, motherhood, and mortality, as she meditates on how to live a meaningful life as the earth heats up and the water levels rise. And just like that, Solnit shows her readers that, although her story about a troubled mother-daughter relationship may seem far away from the most pressing problem now—namely, the threat global warming poses to the survival of humankind, the truth is that considerations of the future of the habitable earth are quite nearby, if you just take the time to stop and consider the significance of the apricots rotting on her floor.

\*

One change I've made to the course is to incorporate an assignment sequence early in the semester designed to get students to actively engage with the process of constructing meaning with what's at hand. (The assignment sequence is inspired by Kate McIntosh's immersive performance piece *Worktable*.) To set the stage, I ask students to donate an object that has some meaning to them to class, knowing they won't get it back. And, I further specify that the object should be worth \$10 at the very most.

They bring their objects to class and place them on the seminar table; I supplement their contributions with stuff I've picked up at garage sales (back when those were a thing). I have them write about why they chose the object they did.

The students are then instructed to select one of the objects for the next assignment, which has yet to be defined. Once they've done so, we talk about picking and choosing. Why did you pick the object you did from the table, I ask.

When I attended McIntosh's piece, out of fifty or so artfully displayed objects of the kind you'd find at a garage sale, I chose the skull of what was either a dog or a deer. My companion chose one object, returned it, and settled on a glossy red, high-heeled shoe.

Inevitably, the object you choose says something about you. Just as the word you choose to focus on out of a pile of words, a passage out of hundreds available on a page, etc. We've completed the first act of McIntosh's performance piece.

I tell the students to go home and disassemble the object they've chosen. What do I mean by "disassemble," the students ask, reasonably. The only clarification I provide, nevertheless, is that they will determine the meaning of the term as they complete the assignment.

When they bring the objects back to class, it is immediately clear that, for some students, disassemble means to separate into component pieces: a clock is taken apart with the aid of small screw drivers, for example. For others, it means to transform: a pumpkin returns as a pumpkin pie, a rubbing replaces a single earring. And for yet others, it means to crush, break, or otherwise render useless. A packet of sidewalk chalk is turned to dust; a music box is smashed; a video tape is unspooled, its magnetic tape piled like spaghetti on a plate.

The pieces are redisplayed on the table. The students write about what they see and then we have a discussion.

What are we looking at, I ask.

Junk, one student offers. An exhibit about pollution, another says. Different definitions of disassemble, another says.

Citational practices? I hazard. Reading practices?

Students select one more time, taking the disassembled object of their choice back home. Their next assignment? Reassemble the object. They can use tape, glue, rubber bands, wire, staples. The only restriction is that they can't choose the same object they disassembled.

The clock returns, screws back in their holes, hands frozen in time. The statue of Aphrodite appears against a background of Botticelli's *Venus on a Half-Shell*, "I will be strong," "I will be brave," "I am more than my body" scrawled across the image. The chalk dust is in separate plastic vials and the vials placed in the ROYGBIV sequence. The piles of video tape are now plumes rising from the repurposed King Kong video box, which has been cut up and reassembled as two long rectangles.

What are we looking at now?

An art exhibit? Recycled junk? Different definitions of reassemble? Of interpretation? Of making meaning?

We focus on those two vertical rectangles, the plumes of video tape atop. "Very political," one student says. An animated discussion follows, praising the student's ability to connect King Kong scaling the Empire State Building and the attack on the Twin Towers. This leads to a discussion of other pieces in the exhibit that have a political valence: the feminist Venus; a repaired red, white, and blue lawn ornament surrounded by a circle of MAGA artifacts; a bulletin board with a rainbow flag. Connections are suggested, tested, alternatives considered, with the end result that new connections emerge. We are watching thinking happen, experiencing the meditative mind at work.

The student who worked with the video tape, preternaturally shy, raises her hand, "Actually, they're pompoms."

Excuse me?

"They're pompoms, not buildings on fire. I just thought I'd make something silly and playful."

We all laugh. We've been caught, I say, by the most consistent challenge to the project of thinking new thoughts: we've seen what we wanted to see.

Is this a problem?

Not really.

That's the beauty of this open-ended experience; it's shared; it's public; the teacher, despite decades of practice thinking reflexively, isn't immune to the rewards of confirmation bias. So, we take this shared experience disassembling, reassembling, collaboratively interpreting and evaluating with us as we return to Solnit's text. When she cites, we go to the original source; we try to construct her world of reference; we are trying to learn her way of taking the world apart and putting it back together; our goal is to learn how she makes meaning out of grief, solitude, and fallibility.

\*

The other modification I've made is to the final assignment. The students still can write about anything *except* the book we've been reading and discussing for the semester. But, as I was explaining the assignment to one of my classes, I stumbled on a much better formulation: the final project is meant to give students a chance to write about a question they want to be sure to have carefully considered before they graduate. Once I put the assignment this way, I wondered why it had taken me decades to have this thought.

With this formulation, the onus of generating the question to be considered falls squarely and irremovably on the student's shoulders. And once the question is generated, it comes pre-loaded with inner motivation: the question hasn't been imposed or determined from outside; it has emerged from the unique concerns of each individual student. Some examples: Why doesn't pre-med education discuss death? Can empathy be learned? Is it possible to recover from betrayal? How do I decide which path to take when making a decision? What effect is social media having on my sense of self? Once a starter question has been generated, the students then spend the last three weeks of the course writing. I have no minimum word count; I say write yourself to a new question; go down rabbit holes; produce something that shows your mind at work on a problem.

The developing projects are all posted on a closed website, where they're available for the other students to read and comment on; some projects include images, video, and sound; others are text only. All the students strive to produce compositions that do the *kind* of work we've been seeing Solnit do over the course of the semester: the writing is question-driven; curious; in conversation with others thinkers and artists; performative; carefully shaped; public.

\*

Before COVID-19 arrived, I was scheduled to teach Reading in Slow Motion again in the fall of 2020. My plans are, at present, uncertain. I don't know that the experience of the course transfers to the virtual realm. I'm inclined to think not, for the simple reason that Reading in Slow Motion is an embodied experience away in a tech-free bubble. That's not possible via Zoom, obviously. If older teachers can't return safely to the classroom, it's possible that the course, as such, will have ended, for me, with Solnit.

If I do get a chance to take up the course again, my current plan is to try a work of fiction for the first time. (It's essential that the students see me learning along with them, so every book I choose has to take me somewhere new.) I'm curious to see if the discussion of a work of fiction can lead to the kind of writing and thinking I value. So, what's next in the queue for me? William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

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