

# REMEMBER STUDENTS

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## REMEMBER STUDENTS

They tell me how they crashed their car on purpose because they were feeling overwhelmed.

They tell me they are dropping out of college to work with their mom's cleaning service because they don't have papers (even though their siblings do).

They are incensed that I, a Queer white man, was allowed to select the texts for the Queer Literature class I am teaching.

They tell me their husband hurts them if they talk about school at home because he thinks they are selfish.

They tell me their husband has said they have to choose between him and their elderly father with dementia.

They invite me to lunch at their corporate cafeteria to discuss the capstone project for their degree.

They are incredulous when I mention stories older than the bible.

They tell me they hope school works out because it's either this or going back to the streets.

They tell me they feel uncomfortable that other students talk about how straight, white men have oppressed BIPOC communities.

They tell me they feel uncomfortable that other students talk about how straight, white men have oppressed Queer, Trans, and Non-binary people.

They tell me they feel uncomfortable that other students talk about how straight, white men have oppressed Women.

They ask me to talk to Black, Latinx, Asian academics about diversifying my reading list.

They tell me they don't feel represented by the characters we are reading.

They tell me they feel this is the first time they feel represented by a character.

They insist on talking over me even when I ask them to be quiet. In week five of the term, I slam my travel mug down on my desk to get their attention. I dent my mug.

They can't wait to talk about the readings. Their conversation before class has so much depth I let it continue, abandoning my lesson plan.

They are tired and don't want to talk because it is a morning class.

They are tired and don't want to talk because it is an evening class.

They are tired and don't want to talk because it is an afternoon class.

They ask me if I can teach a class on Queer New Wave Cinema.

They thank me for working with them even though they were angry they had to take the class.

They thank me for helping them see their experiences in a more complicated way.

They complain because I didn't edit their work for them.

They complain because English 101 is a degree requirement.

They don't understand how they could have been in AP English in high school and placed Remedial English in junior college.

They are gone for two-thirds of the class and ask for an incomplete the day final grades are due.

They are lined up before class waiting for me to unlock the door.

They say there aren't enough white people in the reading list.

They are lethargic until the department chair comes to observe me; then, they shine.

They walk out of my lecture while the program director is observing me.

They want to know if they can bring their kids to class.

They don't feel comfortable since someone has brought their kids to class.

They are confused why I don't want them to bring their kids to class even though the reading we are discussing depicts sex and violence.

They are upset they have to complete a diversity requirement.

They are happy Queer Literature fulfills the diversity requirement.

They take a class project and turn it into a self-sustaining nonprofit.

They tell me they have never read an entire book. I have assigned multiple.

They call me after midnight to tell me they think I am “cool.” I can smell the alcohol through the receiver.

They call me five times while I am in the shower demanding I answer the phone. I stop giving out my home phone number.

They thank me for being available to them, even during the pandemic when I have Zoom meetings.

They say they could never get ahold of me.

They give me low scores on my Online Teaching Evaluation and leave a comment that they just don’t like the sound of my voice.

They pull out their phones to look up an obscure reference I make. I love that they do.

They invite me for end-of-term beers.

They tell me they have come out to their parents and friends because they were inspired by the class.

They thank me for teaching even though they hated being in my class.

They walk out of the classroom, and I never see them again.

They email me to tell me they are going back to school.

They ask me to write a letter of recommendation even though I haven’t heard from them in six years.

They tell me they are looking at doctoral programs. They want to pay me to edit their application.

They tell me they are fine and don’t want to talk about their job.

They murder several people before committing suicide years after they were in my class.

They complete their degree online and travel half way across the country to walk across the graduation stage.

They ask me to write them a letter of recommendation for a school that discriminates against Queer people.

They tell me they are hungry.

They won't eat the Dunkin Donuts Munchkins I bring.

They write final papers that make me ecstatic.

They won't respond to me when I send them emails begging them to submit anything so I can justify passing them.

They don't know why I have to take attendance.

They don't know why I have to keep the class going the entire session.

They call me professor even though I am contingent faculty.

They complain to me about tuition not realizing that one student's tuition more than covers my fee for teaching a 16-week class.

#### COMMENTARY

Between 2005 and 2016, my primary employment was part-time contingent faculty at various two- and four-year institutions of higher education around Chicago. As someone who was hired by the term, I had tenuous relationships to the institutions that employed me. Although I might be hired regularly, I was just as regularly reminded that each teaching assignment I took did not indicate a relationship to an institution that lasted longer than the assigned term. The tenuous relationships did not prevent meaningful encounters with students I worked with. However, it did underscore my ephemeral relationship with them. In one term, I might be teaching Queer Literature. In another, I might be teaching a curriculum based in U.S. civics. This experience provided the vignettes and encounters depicted in the above poem, *Remember Students*.

The structure of the poem is modeled on Shane Allison's (2020) poem, *Remember Men*. But the intellectual impetus began with a *currerean* regressive step and practices described in Diamond and Mullen's (1999), *The Postmodern Educator*, which posits, "As readers, we are more affected by the repeated images and metaphors of a poem than we are by the propositions and statements of prose" (p. 25). Artistic form can open meanings academic forms cannot. A poem can capture the messiness of vulnerability in education that prose tends to resist in favor of concise narrative or discrete argument. The messiness can be full of possibilities of meaning. These possibilities are complicated and unresolved. In this commentary on *Remember Students*, I explore the implication of the poetic structure and its resonance with the concept's ephemerality and vulnerability.

## STRUCTURE

Structure and form are never neutral decisions. When shaping a text, structure and form provide as much information and meaning as what they contain. Or as Marshal McLuhan (1995) more pithily declares, “the medium is the message” (p. 151). While the litany (or repeated list) is a historic poetic technique, an impulse led me to use Allison’s work as a model. This impulse was a sense of similarity between Allison’s depictions of encounters with men and my reflections on classroom encounters with students. Vulnerability and ephemerality of relations ground the similarity.

Allison’s work is boldly and beautifully erotic. It allows the reader to share what feels like actual experience. His single line vignettes form a pattern. Each line had a similar structure with a different incident. His lines uncover complicated and temporary relationships that happened in ephemeral spaces (cars, rest rooms, etc.). His ephemeral relationships hinge on forms of intimacy that disrupt social patterns. Even instability can become balanced through repetition and pattern. Although there are many examples of this in Allison’s poem, one stands out in my mind. In this passage, the speaker is made to promise not to tell Dustin about an encounter. The reader is never told more about Dustin and is left with only an understanding of a violation of some understanding that is to be kept secret. The relationships are between the speaker, the partner, and Dustin are left unresolved. The only thing to know is that speaker and partner have a complicated and temporary relationship.

As a contingent faculty member who worked at multiple institutions, my relationships with students have been complicated and temporary in different ways. My relationships were bound by a single academic term (in rare cases two) and the ephemeral space of the classroom. For students, I represented an institution with which I was only loosely affiliated. Even sequential employment contracts came with the caveat that there was no guarantee of future employment. The tenuous ties to institutions belie the poignancy of ties between instructor and student. The content of *Remember Students* builds on various emotional encounters. In drawing on Allison’s poetic form, I hope to resist depicting resolution in relationships and encounters that were never actually resolved because of their ephemerality.

## EPHEMERALITY

The ephemerality of human relationships resonates between Allison’s and my experiences. The association of the ephemeral with the human is nothing novel. The Ancient Greek term *ephemeroi* (or creature of a day), which can be translated as *men*, is offered as a close etymological cousin to the English word ephemera. Hauskeller (2019) invokes the term *ephemeroi* to highlight the inherent vulnerability of being human. Vulnerability is not potential damage but the experience of potential damage (pp. 11–12). As humans, our relationships, even the temporary, leave us vulnerable. The vulnerability within these relationships remains even in memory.

Often in my strongest relations with students, I felt like Lisa Simpson’s substitute teacher Mr. Bergstrom. The episode of *The Simpson* aired in the second season (Groening et al., 1991) but still feels relevant. This substitute teacher and student bond through learning in the classroom. Lisa feels a deep affection for him. Eventually, Mr. Bergstrom had to explain to Lisa that the nature of his employment designation (substitute teacher) requires him to move on. All

he can do to acknowledge their bond is to hand her a note that says, “You are Lisa Simpson” (n.p.). The note emphasizes that what matters is her own identity and not their relationship. Their relationship cannot overcome its essential ephemerality. While acknowledging the ephemerality of the teacher-student relationship, Mr. Bergstrom allows himself to become vulnerable. Lisa’s vulnerability is revealed in her loss of a teacher who understands and can cultivate her talents. Mr. Bergstrom’s vulnerability is in acknowledging that he sees himself as a fraud since he adjusts his professional identity based on his contract, sometimes a gym teacher, or a French teacher, or a shop teacher but never with a class or pupil of his own. Adjusting identity to fit a temporary contract is behavior I recognize in myself when I reflect on transitioning from teaching Queer literature to American civics to remedial writing.

Returning to *Remember Men*, Allison displays vulnerability by describing a lover who ends their relationship to be with his pregnant girlfriend. It is easy to understand the speaker’s vulnerability, the wound of rejection. But the lover also reveals his vulnerability, the wound of sacrificing one love for another. In *Remember Students*, I recall many students who displayed their vulnerability to me. But I feel that they could be vulnerable with me because I was vulnerable with them.

## VULNERABILITY

Many of these events and relationships in my poem happened before I was thinking about curriculum and teaching in a reflective way. Perhaps my tacit aspirations reflected the vulnerability envisioned by Brantmeier (2013) when he discussed the pedagogy of vulnerability: “Vulnerability is an act of courage. An attitude of not knowing, of discovery, and of critical self-dialogue steer a pedagogy of vulnerability” (p. 96). *Remember Students* inadvertently reflects a key process in Brantmeier’s (2013) pedagogy of vulnerability: “self and mutual disclosure on the part of co-learners in the classroom” (p. 97)

My poem relies on many disclosures, including those about my identity. After a few years of teaching, I realized that, since I am a white, cis, male, many students presumed I was heterosexual. This assumption gifted me a full range of social privilege. My visible and assumed identity characteristics gave me a lot of authority in the classroom. But this assumption was alienating since I could not mention my most important relationships in class. This constellation of identity characteristics could also alienate students since it could be difficult for some to relate to someone who was reaching out from a privileged place. I felt I needed to be vulnerable to circumvent the disequilibrium. My decision to openly acknowledge my Queerness, my partner, and loved ones arose from this reflection.

Acknowledging this aspect of my identity was not a matter of announcing it. Instead, acknowledgement was a decision to no longer edit anecdotes or comments to make them neutral so that heterosexuality could be projected on me. I understood that this vulnerability was easier for me because of my other social privilege. At the same time, I was allowing myself to be vulnerable by surfacing my invisible identifications. A friend confided in me that he had decided he could not acknowledge his homosexuality to students because they already challenged him because he was Black. The different decisions my friend and I made are consistent with Brantmeier’s (2013) assumptions about “privilege and power in vulnerability” and that in some contexts “the risks of vulnerability outweigh the benefits” (p. 102).

My vulnerability was not appreciated universally. Some students let me know they felt discomfort since I was the first non-heterosexual they had knowingly engaged with. Alternatively in some classes like my sections of Queer Literature, a few students questioned the legitimacy of my Queerness—whether I was queer enough. However, many of my students recognized a kinship with me even if we shared few other demographic characteristics. In allowing myself to be vulnerable, I opened up the possibility of being wounded as well as building relationships. The tensions between these positions are threaded through *Remember Students*.

## CONCLUSION

*Remember Students* reminds me of the complicated and ephemeral relationships I have had with students as contingent faculty. There has been joy. There has been frustration. And there have been gradients and shades of many other emotions for both my students and myself. A willingness to be vulnerable has allowed for the complexity to be experienced in ephemeral encounters. Poetic repetition allowed me the opportunity to exhibit complexity while not trying to resolve it. As a creature of the day, I hope to remember that recognizing ephemerality and cultivating vulnerability can be poignant entry points to actual relationships.

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