

Fragments: on learning and teaching and learning again

*Maria Thereza Dumas Neto*¹

Act I, scene I

There is a classroom. Rows of tables, neatly organized. They are stuck to the floor, so that the children don't move them – rows of immobile tables with scribbles and colored gel pens with their caps off, forgotten. Inside the classroom, there is a teacher, with kind eyes. Inside the classroom, there is a child, and the child is me.

I sit on the floor, cross-legged, feeling my teacher's eyes calling me. She is also on the floor; she also has her legs crossed and her feet tucked beneath her. We both hear the other kids outside, playing and eating and catching up during the break. The teacher holds my hands in her own, a little too tightly.

"Do you want to try again?," she asks, but it's not really a question. I answer anyway, shaking my head no. "Just one more time," she says, smiling, but it's probably not really a smile. I whine, and she sighs, and I squeeze my eyes shut before shifting them to hers. I stare directly into the kind eyes, and she counts out loud. "One... two... three...," she counts over the kids playing and over my stomach rumbling, "seven... eight... nine...," and I look away again. She sighs and I whine.

"Let's try one more time, I promise that when we get to thirty you can go outside!" It's been days of lessons over the breaks, but I haven't gotten over twelve so far and I'm hungry. "Do you want to count with me this time?" It's not really a question and it's not really a choice. She reinforces her grip in my hands, so that I won't fidget. Tenderly, she runs her thumbs over my knuckles. "Again," she says softly, and I look her in the eyes. "One... two... three... four..." We get to eight and my eyes shift again. I start to rock, a small sway back and forth, and she quickly envelops me into a hug, making my skin prickle. "That's okay, we can just start again. Soon you'll get it, you'll see, then you'll be able to look all your friends in the eye, isn't that cool?" I start to answer her that I don't care, and I don't think they do either, but she interrupts me, her own eyes shiny and fierce "It's important that you *learn*." Her sweet voice is unaffected.

Act I, scene II

When I go off to college my high school teachers bid me goodbye, saying I'm fit to be a teacher, but it's mostly because I'm a know-it-all. I've craved these words. I've been dreading them. They engulf me, but I'm not sure if it's more like a hug or more like a chokehold. Still,

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I swallow the whirlwind down and nod and graciously laugh like I was taught to when receiving compliments. I'm a pretty good student if I say so myself.

Act I, scene III

I raise my hand again, but I can't wait to be called on, so I just answer. "The English School," I borderline yell in the silent class. There are twenty-five students, but every lesson is quiet – only scribbles of pens and pencils and taps of a keyboard and the deep rumble of the professor's voice. I write down every word and make notes when everyone around me laughs so that later I can re-read and try to understand what the joke was. His voice swishes and dances in countless ways throughout those four hours and I hope I can somewhat learn the differences in his tone before the end of the semester.

Today he decided he'd do an oral quiz; he starts the class saying we don't participate enough, so, who here has read the text? I raise my hand, along with a few others. It was a pretty good text, and it is always exhilarating to go to class and make sense of the reading. He asks the first question and I promptly answer, and he gives me a look. My brow creases for just one second before translating: this is a look I've certainly seen before; it means "raise your hand before talking". I got the answer right though, so he moves on. He asks the second question, and my hand shoots up because I really enjoyed the text and I've got a bunch of cool facts about Hedley Bull lined up at the back of my mind, ready to come out.

Someone snickers, but I'm too eager to pay attention.

He lets me answer the third and then the fourth question and by then he's pacing. Everyone else maintains the usual weekly silence, apart from maybe a few yawns. Then he asks the fifth question and I borderline yell out the answer, enthusiastic. He sighs. The silence somehow feels different now, both quieter and louder.

"Would you *please* let someone else have a chance of answering?"

This is a tone I haven't heard before, so I cock my head before complying and letting myself be absorbed into the communal quietness. He asks the next question and looks around, but the weird silence stays – the feeling of something ready to burst. I absentmindedly wonder if its excitement.

"Anyone?" His loud and grave voice fills the whole room, but the silence is more persistent and pushes the voice back, sucks it out completely. He calls on someone, but the student mumbles that he doesn't know the answer. I am tapping my foot, someone else coughs. The professor sighs again and comes back to my table "*Fine*. What's the answer then?" – 'mean, but in a fun way' is the way someone described the professor to me before I took this class. I smile before answering because I'm having fun too.

When I'm done and the room lapses again to soundlessness, he looks at his notes but eventually goes to the board and picks up a piece of chalk. "Never mind, let's just have a normal class." There's something in his voice, but I don't quite catch it.

It was exasperation, I'll find out years later, talking to a friend in a coffeeshop months after graduation. "God, remember that day?" he will say randomly, reminiscing. "He was so mad at you! We thought he would yell, or tell you to leave or something."

But I don't remember. At least, I don't remember it like that. I thought we were playing a game, together. He would ask, and I would answer, bouncing ideas back and forth. I thought we were on the same team. In my memories, he was calling for the others to join in – his voice was an invitation to be a part of something.

Maybe I would prefer if he had yelled. Maybe then I wouldn't be so lost.

Act I, scene IV

I am in the coordinator's office. They called me in for a private conversation to talk about "my behavior". "My behavior" is always its own thing, apparently, and it gets me in some trouble for being irreverent from time to time, although I'm mostly oblivious to it.

Last week "my behavior" seemingly made a professor cry, when, in the final day of the semester, he asked if his class had been good and I said "no", matter-of-factly. Because for me it was a fact – the semester had been bad because of five main reasons I wrote down for him. I shared at length what could be improved: how the lesson plan could be organized better, how the weekly activities were unhelpful and why. Afterwards, someone came to tell me they saw him crying in the corridor. I didn't really realize it was because of me until I'm called in for a conversation with the coordination, a week later.

"He was really hurt by what you said to him," they start, sternly. "Do you think it was appropriate to say those things?"

Hours later I'll realize this was a rhetorical question, but for now, I answer: "I mean, he did ask for feedback. I wanted to be helpful."

They make a face and wait. I'm not sure what for. I wait longer.

Finally, they sigh, roll their eyes. I think they're tired. "And do you *really* think it was helpful?"

I want to answer "yes", but I'm slowly learning that the question is not really a question, and that I'm really meant to be quiet.

The next semester I spend days practicing in front of the mirror before the final week comes: "It was a great class!" I repeat out loud to myself, weighing the sound in my ears. "It was a great class!" I train the inflexion my voice makes, trying to mimic the high pitch tone I've heard my colleagues use off the cuff, whenever feedback is sought. "It was a great class!" It takes me some time, but I can copy and train and learn the right lines.

Act I, scene V

I've been told I always talk like I'm having a debate. Especially in class, I can't help but push when someone half-heartedly shrugs and mumbles an opinion: you can't just say it – fight for it, make it make sense. And sometimes this goes very wrong, but sometimes people are eager to come and play. And thus, one day me and a colleague end up taking to the classroom floor to argue over a conceptual disagreement – our faces split into smiles and words tumbling out as fast as they can. Some other people chime in, the discussion is pushed and pulled, with no resolution in sight. I think the professor is amused, because she doesn't stop us: she lets the class run its course and then end as we suddenly halt and reluctantly stop talking.

We eye each other as we pack our things and hear everyone leaving until finally I impulsively go up to him, because even after all of this *I still don't understand*.

“Do you wanna go get a coffee and continue talking?” I ask and he smiles and months later he'll tell me he was a bit taken aback by the proposal, but right now I can't really tell.

We walk to the nearest coffee shop, the one with the best carrot cake I've ever had, and try to carry with us the atmosphere of lively exchange we were able to revel in. Luckily, it remains alive, and just as we sit at a table and order I bluntly ask: “I just don't get it. Why do you like Marxism so much?”

I expect the continuation of his argument from before, I even smugly have my response to his points lined up already, but his face shifts and he takes a sip of his hot coffee and then starts talking about his father. I cock my head, because he talks solemnly, as if this is important, but it isn't. Is it?

He makes a pause and my eagerness to point out my issues with the second chapter is halted by my curiosity over his intensity. I'm confused and for the first time in our two semesters quipping over multiple disagreements I become aware of him. I blush because I've been going about this all wrong, and here he is, generously giving me something.

So I let him talk and stay enraptured. I find that I enjoy seeing his world come to life before me, as he lets me take a peek, witness the foundations that support it, the machinery that makes it function. “He's a person,” I contently conclude in my head as he talks about the Communist Manifesto and the books he keeps in his nightstand. “He's a whole person who thinks and feels at the same time”. Somehow, this is groundbreaking.

He talks for twice the time we argued, and I'm happy we brought the openness of the classroom here with us, nourished it, gave it cake. When we order another piece to split is his turn to ask me why I was so vehement about an author we read a few weeks ago and I allow myself to stop for a second, to ponder for a moment before attempting an answer. After all, I'm probably a person too.

When we finally get up to pay the bill, we both have big, dumb, matching grins.

Act I, scene VI

“You're all in a very competitive masters program, so act like it. Otherwise, you have no right to be here,” a voice booms through an email. When I read it the voice booms through me, and I end up swallowing it and the voice burrows itself somewhere in the folds of my stomach and sometimes when I open my mouth to talk it's that voice that comes out.

Act I, scene VII

It's the last day of the first year of the masters and the last meeting of a particularly uncomfortable class. The teachers asked our opinions on the semester and someone opens up their mic to boast about how the lectures were great while in another tab I see them bashing the professor in the group chat. The cognitive dissonance makes my skin crawl. The professor says it was an honor to teach us, and someone warns me privately that he's full of shit and that he's being passive aggressive again, but I don't quite believe either of them.

Faces are always a bit of a mystery to me, and I try to stare intently into every little zoom square to piece together what is really going on, but every expression appears to be

deliberately placed and specifically put together – all of the smiles and nods and even the blank stares look like masks carefully crafted for this moment. They act as a barrier: protection in the form of distance. When I notice it, I have to stop typing and touch my own face; I don't remember putting it on, but maybe I'm wearing one too. "A perfect match. Will fit right in," my recommendation letters boasted. I'm not sure I really stopped to understand what this meant.

I came here with a promise, in the form of an expectation, from my best classes, from my best teachers – a chance to reach for the moments I loved most at university again. Now, only half hearing the feedback for the semester, it feels like every interaction we had in this class is meaningless, is devoid of meaning. Our participation ticks boxes, but never starts a conversation. The classroom has always felt like a place for connection, a structured space of interaction. It helps, having these clear-cut rules for a conversation, having someone to guide it. Even if I get things wrong. Even if I'm reprimanded.

But here, I can't reach anyone.

I unabashedly participated throughout the semester, like I always have, and this time, no professor outright scolded me – instead, I got a text message from a classmate saying they didn't appreciate my reaction when I disagreed with a point they made. I hadn't noticed my tone and my frown, and didn't want to be rude, so over the months I started paying more attention: to my inflection; to my expression; to the number of times I raised my hand to disagree, to ask for more, to interchange. Still, a lot of the times it became easier, safer, not to engage. Just in case.

When we all say our goodbyes, I click to close the meeting and just like that I'm immediately alone in my room again. It's been a year and yet I feel no meaningful connections. Any word can feel like an attack, and so I can't disagree with someone without fear of immediately causing conflict. I can't fathom the possibility of asking someone for virtual coffee and a cake.

I think about how severed I feel from everyone around me and realize I don't even know what I'm doing here anymore.

Act II, scene I

An email arrives at my inbox: "Teaching Assistant Positions". I've been somewhat putting off the idea of teaching and any thoughts on it, but I need these credits this semester, so I apply, without allowing myself to overthink this. The title swirls in my tongue like the name of a new role I'll have to take on, so I do my research, talking to the last TAs: how many classes did you teach? What was your relationship with the students? And with the professor? What's the point of a TA? What will be expected of me? But the answers are all too varied for me to compile a list of guidelines of correct behavior.

In the last weeks of the break I keep dreaming about being in a classroom again, but I never know where to sit. I realize that even with all of my classroom euphoria I never thought about teaching concretely, as a real possibility, as a long-term career plan. I rushed into the masters to keep on being a student, and chase being a part of a learning environment, a community – I like being a student and longing for the moments where I'll bask in the

atmosphere of a good discussion, even with all there is in between. But being a teacher feels wrong, somehow. Feels painful. Powerful. I say the title out loud and it tastes bad in my mouth.

Act II, scene II

Apprehension quickly turns into fear and by the time the prep meeting the professor arranged before my first class arrives, I have let my mind spiral into convincing myself I made a huge mistake being here. We talk about the lesson plan, and mix some of my ideas with his, and then I can't help admitting to him that I'm scared. His expression is unreadable as he asks why and although it shifts as I try to answer it remains indecipherable. I conjure up reasons to be afraid: I won't understand the tones of the students; I won't know how to answer their questions; I feel like I don't know enough – there's so much to learn still, how can I claim myself knowledgeable to *teach*? But even as I answer him, I know it's not quite right – these are all true, but they also hide the truth, the real reason for such apprehension, the one even I don't have access to yet.

He somewhat tries to comfort me, and we bid goodbye and we'll see each other next week. I turn off the computer and then I'm not just scared, I know I am terrified, deeply and wholly terrified, my bones shake. I look at my painstakingly frightened expression reflected on the computer screen and feel inadequate, a familiar feeling by now.

Act II, scene III

When I teach my first class there are no neatly divided rows of tables, but precisely stacked zoom squares on a screen. A grid of names and a few faces, two-dimensional. I don't mind the absence of faces that much – faces for me generally signify a gap of meanings, eyebrow creases might as well be hieroglyphs.

The silence bugs me though. With everyone on mute, I can't hear any reaction: no hushed laughs, yawns, or clearing of throats, gasps of disagreement; the only humming comes from the computer. I'm the only one breathing.

With a pang of nervousness, I look at my cat, at his usual spot in the home office: stretched out in the windowsill. I look at him and then there's something alive with me for the ride and I teach.

Afterwards the teacher gives me pointers. How to talk better, how to move, how to challenge the students through the use of space, through sound, through silence. "You can move your body like that, your voice like this – you can search for this reaction, and maybe practice leaning in this way," he says as he leans closer to the camera, affirming it as a way to take up space, to challenge. I'm barely listening, but I probably should be writing it down and compiling a guideline.

Still, the words sound like a script. Directors' notes on how to act properly - it feels like switching places, but I don't want to switch. "Not yet?" I find myself thinking, but I'm not sure who I'm pleading with.

Act II, scene IV

We get into the habit of having long talks after classes, brief breaths of company during isolated times. It's the first time in a year time itself isn't precisely carved. In Zoom rhythms, interactions are cut with an Exact-o knife: there's a click and class begins, and with a click again, it ends, and that space immediately ceases to be, is sucked out of existence – it doesn't transfer to the corridor, doesn't spread out in a short walk to the bus stop, doesn't cling along with companionship. But for now, leaving can feel like a slow exhale again – the atmosphere lingers and slowly dissipates, and spending time in a space with a shared meaning feels nice, even if it's just for a little while.

Today he's sharing with me his rules for interacting with the students, and hearing about the behind the scenes of existing as a teacher makes it dawn on me: to be a teacher is to have authority – to have the power to *create and enforce* the rules. I make a face, uneasy and distressed. The idea seems more like an obvious afterthought, but it sticks with me for days, so I rearrange the words to figure out why: I've spent my whole life trying to discover the rules, trying to learn the pesky rules that order a world that doesn't quite make sense to me, and I have no idea what would mean to have the power to make my own. Authority feels inherently violent – I can't actually control the students, but I know the forceful disciplining of the classroom all too well.

Act II, scene V

I get a text from a colleague with whom I've barely talked to before. "I had an autistic teacher in college. He was autistic, but he was very good," he shares with me, unprompted. The 'but' nags at me. He probably thought this would be reassuring, *but* it isn't; maybe he considered it a compliment, *but* it is not; I wish I wasn't so affected by it, *but* I am.

Act II, scene VI

I mostly can't get any meaning out of facial expressions and body language. I particularly can't when I'm interacting with people I don't know very well, and when it's a lot of people at once. Ergo: in front of a classroom, I am lost.

In my lecture, a student makes a comment and I see those with their cameras open laughing, so I smile tentatively, uncertain. He must have noticed my hesitancy though, because minutes later he sends me a private message explaining that he had been ironic. I thank him for letting me know and smile at the camera, hopefully seeming more genuine this time, assuming he'll be looking at my square. I scold myself internally though: I shouldn't need this guidance, I'm the one who's supposed to be leading.

From the beginning, I told them: I need you to talk to me – I will not realize your creased brows mean you're not understanding the subject, I can't sense your boredom and adapt, I'm not able to interpret your outrageous expressions and call on you to participate and share any disagreement, like other professors do. You have to ask, to join in. Having this certainty, this profound understanding that I don't have access to their reactions unless they tell me means I have to trust that they'll *want* to be a part of this. They'll have to claim their own space. It has to be a conversation, us turning together not just as a way to communicate, but in a relation with each other, an exchange – they'll have to work as much as me. Despite being certain of this, I don't want them to know I need their help, although of course I do.

Act II, scene VII

In the last day of the semester, the teacher whom I assist asks the students for the usual feedback, for my lectures too. Only a few of them talk, a lot of the class wasn't even in the meeting to begin with. Still, three voices say I did a good job: a high pitched "It was a great class!", almost the same intonation every time. The same tone I spent hours training to be able to replicate seamlessly – the tone my classmates used when they didn't feel like really answering and just wanted the conversation to end.

Act II, scene VIII

After the semester ends, some of the TAs hold a zoom meeting to celebrate and compare experiences. It's fun and chaotic and filled with the excitement of something beginning, even though this is an ending: a lot of them see this past semester as the first step of long teaching careers, for them it wasn't a bite-sized experience in the classroom but promises of a bright future that will play out *just like this*: they share their ideas for organization, their imaginary programs for imaginary disciplines; they share opinions on slides, grading systems and tests. They look so sure of themselves, so certain of their ambitions and plans.

I want to ask: how are you so confident? Aren't you scared? Didn't you feel like you were holding something precious? Weren't you terrified that you would crush it? Didn't you look at your own hands with horror?

Act II, scene IX

With a friend, I share my concerns. She also experienced the classroom as a teacher for the first time this semester and I am desperate for someone to relate to me, for someone to say *yes*, I feel it too, *yes*, it does make sense. So when she offhandedly mentions that she was scared before going into her first lecture the words tumble out of my mouth: me too! I was terrified! And then I don't even wait for her reaction before confiding in her – I was so scared of not being capable of guiding the discussion, of not keeping it *alive*; if a classroom is a place where multiple realities can co-exist, it is up to me to make sure there's enough space. I'm scared I'll ruin it - I am terribly afraid to make this place inhospitable. Yes, *yes*, you get it, the terror that sticks to your trachea. The dread of doing something wrong, of – of what? I pause. I still don't know what stuns me the most, the words to explain it evade me, run off. In the silence, I realize I had been talking way too loud, over-eager worries shooting out of my mouth.

In the silence, she finishes her sentence: "I was gonna say I was scared the internet would be too unstable."

A pause.

"Oh" I shrink myself in my seat. "That makes sense."

A laugh.

"But damn, you're really overthinking this, aren't you?" I'm not sure if she expects me to answer, but she continues: "Trust me, you're making this way bigger than it really is."

I look her in the eye and my mind automatically starts counting. I wonder if I'll ever be able to get to the full thirty seconds. Without realizing, I feel myself squeezing my hands tight to keep them still as she continues her explanation.

Encore

I, of course, make it all even bigger. I write thousands of words about it.

It's been months since the finish line of my clear cut, bite sized experience as a teacher, and maybe I should let go and get over it. Still, something about it feels special enough to warrant holding on to it, to stash it someplace private. There are still things to understand. So, it's been a few months and I write – trying to get something out and still unsure of what. Ultimately, I think the problem is that teaching is fun. Teaching was so fun, and that's the scariest part. I think that I'm most afraid of how much I enjoyed it.