

“How am I Supposed to Watch a Little Piece of Paper?” Literacy and Learning Under Duress

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The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the troubling fact that many students struggle to pay attention to literacy learning while they are in situations of extreme duress. This duress did not begin with pandemic, nor will it end with it. Neither is duress distributed at random; those negatively affected by the nation's prejudices, as a general rule, are under more duress than those who reap the benefits of these systems. To achieve an equitable curriculum, we must teach with the attentional needs of those under duress in mind.

This article explores how writing instructors can develop curricula that work with these needs. It looks at research on learning under duress as well as student work that was written in crisis, building upon the strengths of those under duress (who often, for example, write with a sense of urgency and keen awareness of their immediate surroundings) instead of trying to “cure” what we may perceive as weaknesses. A curriculum that speaks to the strengths of students with these experiences will be vital both during the pandemic and beyond it.¹

The first time one of my students called a reading “boring” in a class I taught, I asked the whole class, as I often do, what makes a reading boring. I got many of the responses I usually get: students describing being forced to read texts that they felt had nothing to do with them or just wanting to do something else. But then I got a response I had never heard before. Ray, a young man on a football scholarship who had grown up around a great deal of violence, said, “How am I supposed to watch a little piece of paper when I’m worried someone might be coming at me?” This response has stuck with me for a number of reasons: first of all, of course, because of the violence implicit in it and also because of my own naivete: though it’s obvious, it had never crossed my mind that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to concentrate on “a little piece of paper” if one had to be hypervigilant of one’s surroundings. It also clarified for me the idea of attention as a limited resource, and a resource whose distribution is not just a matter of personal preference or neurological capacity, but which is learned, taught, and demanded by forces which are often out of our control.

In his 1994 address, “The Economics of Attention,” rhetorician Richard Lanham claimed: “if one is looking for a glimpse of what literacy will look

like in the future, the fighter cockpit is a good place to look” (Lanham). In other words, he predicted that literacy acts would involve the fending off of numerous distractions and require an increasing amount of attentional skill in order for the reader to remain focused on the task at hand.² In his address, Lanham suggested that we were facing, “not a population explosion, but a document explosion,” which would lead to a new scarcity, the scarcity of “the human attention needed to make sense of information.”

I don’t think we can look at how an individual inside a fighter cockpit behaves without looking at the factors that placed them in a fighter jet in the first place. In other words, just as the study of economics is much more than the study of how one individual distributes the pennies in their piggy bank, so should the study of the economics of attention be the study of more than how each individual distributes their kernels of attention among the many possible attractors of that attention. And yet, the discussion of literacy and attentional economics is often just that: how does an individual slog through the endless information they are faced with? How does a person parse through all the articles on the internet? My point here is that attention is not a purely physiological or personal impulse, but also a social one; we learn to pay attention (or to act like we’re paying attention;) we learn what ways of paying attention are socially acceptable in certain situations and not others. This learning is cultural, not just a personal neurological resource.

I am interested in the politics of paying attention, especially supposed failures of attention like boredom and distraction, as in the anecdote about Ray. I am interested in what kind of work these distractions do; we’re always paying attention to something, even if it’s not what we’re supposed to be paying attention to. In the words of cognitive neuroscientists Dima Amso and Gaia Scerif: “attention processes determine what information is selected for subsequent perception, action, learning and memory, imposing a crucial bottleneck” (606). That is, if attention functions “properly,” it slows perception down, helping us make sense of cluttered worlds and cluttered brains. But attention often functions improperly or, rather, sometimes the way attention works doesn’t quite match instructors’ desires. Ray’s attention was functioning just fine to protect himself in the situation in which he grew up, for example, but it was not functioning in the way I wanted it to—to help him focus on the reading.

Under duress, attention functions differently than it might under other, less demanding circumstances. There are strengths to all attentional skills, though the skills that come more easily to us when we are not under duress tend to be valued more highly in academia. When I use the term “duress” here, I am using it in its original etymological sense, that is: “hardness, oppression, constraint” (“Duress, *n.*”). These constraints come with serious attentional demands. This duress—and these demands—are not distributed at random. They follow the

cultural biases: those negatively affected by white supremacy, sexism (and corresponding sexual violence), homophobia, transphobia, and so on, as a general rule, are under more strain than those who benefit from these systems.

To achieve an equitable curriculum, we must teach with the attentional needs of those under duress in mind. This article sets out to consider the present and imminent implications of these aforementioned crises for literacy learning in terms of attention and distraction under duress. It also takes as a given the unfortunate fact that violence and duress will not end with these particular crises (as they did not begin with them) and that some students have exposure to more stressors than others and are therefore more taxed attentionally. Most importantly: this article argues that this reality—that duress taxes attention—should be considered when all curricula are designed. Even without a pandemic, experiences that tax attention—like poverty and trauma—disproportionately affect students of color, disabled students, LGBTQIA+ students, and women, due to societal influences like homophobia, poverty, misogyny, transphobia, sexual violence, police brutality, and institutional racism. Therefore, when designing a curriculum, we must ask: how do I design this in a way that does not exclude those actively under duress? How do we build on attentional strengths instead of trying to “cure” what we may perceive as weaknesses?³

I argue that we can do this by focusing on a few simple principles, which I outline throughout this article, both by the use of research on attention and also by examples of student writing. These principles are:

1. Understanding attention. Those under duress are often mislabeled as lazy or even belligerent, students who aren't trying to succeed. This is rarely, if ever, the case.
2. Finding footholds. Here, I turn to psychologist Bessel van der Kolk's research on trauma, which suggests students begin with skills that give them a sense of calm competence and from there build toward the more uncomfortable sites of uncertainty in writing.
3. Deep attending. In his 2019 address to the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Asao Inoue talked about “deep attending” when interacting with students. In other words, in order for students to pay attention, they must be paid attention to. We should assume our students are making meaning, though that meaning may not always be immediately clear.

Methods

My research on attention, literacy, and duress began pre-pandemic in a classroom at a large public research university in the Midwest. The class was composed entirely of young men on football scholarships who had been placed on

a track that required them to take one basic writing course before they took mainstream freshman composition. (Ray, of the opening anecdote, was one of these scholars.) Of the eighteen students, seventeen were African American. Of these students, three were also mixed race. This was a large proportion in a school that was approximately 8% African American (“Student Diversity Dashboard”). Many players reported coming from situations where violence and poverty were commonplace, and all of the Black players reported having been harassed by police starting from a very young age. I never asked students to disclose any of this information; students volunteered it in their writing. The first semester, the football players had been placed together due to a scheduling anomaly; the class requested to stay together in the second semester, with many students reporting enjoying an environment where they could feel “at home” with one another.

Because of my work with these scholars in the first semester pre-transfer level course, I wanted to concentrate on designing a curriculum and teaching methods for the second semester transfer-level course that included students who have experienced trauma and violence, as well as other forms of duress within a mainstream curriculum, by using principles of Universal Design. I didn’t assume all of the students had experienced trauma or violence (though I knew some had), and I didn’t want to ask students to reveal more than they wanted to. I also did not want to set the learning experience of those under duress apart from other students. As Margaret Price writes, “Universal design sets as its ideal a learning environment that is accessible to all learning styles, abilities, and personalities” (87). I wanted a curriculum that assumes our classes include students with complex, sometimes troubled lives, and I wanted to design capacious curricula that includes as many students as possible without insisting on disclosure.

The curriculum consisted of three major papers, based largely on students’ interests. I also wanted to work toward library research. The assignments were roughly as follows: In essay one, students wrote about a word or phrase that was important to their community. They were asked to express the history and importance of this word to potential outsiders. In essay two, because the students were very interested in music, and because I was able to get an MTV music reviewer as a guest speaker, I asked the students to write a music review, using the music as a jumping-off point to talk about other important cultural issues the songs brought up for them. In essay three, because many of the students expressed an interest in writing about Black history, the assignment (scaffolded from a close reading of a history-rich, and quite difficult, article by essayist Greg Tate) was to write about an historical event of their choosing for a modern-day audience, convincing that audience why this event was important to contemporary life. They were required to research the topic.

I tried to read the players' bodies of work with the openness a literary scholar might read an experimental writer like Jean Toomer or Gertrude Stein. That is to say: if I didn't understand something, I assumed the fault lay, at least in part, with my inexpert reading, so I read it again. Alongside scholarship on literacy, and attention and duress, I read the body of the student's work looking for patterns, repeated topics, places where the language surprised me. I looked for where they were losing attention and to what they paid attention. I searched for sites where it seemed these writers had started building meaning in unexpected places. This is how I began to learn about the strengths of writing through trauma and distress, research which has proven increasingly pertinent during this time of global duress.

Understanding Attention

Before I move on, I would like to situate myself and my own experience. When I first went to college, I was diagnosed with a "developmental trauma disorder," a form of posttraumatic stress brought about by ongoing violence or abuse in early childhood. I wasn't in an environment in which there was constant gunfire (which might explain why, despite my own experience with trauma, I was taken aback when Ray found danger in concentrating on "a little piece of paper," an experience quite different from my own,) but I was in an environment where I was in constant fear and under constant threat of physical abuse.

Developmental trauma is particularly salient for issues of attention because it can cause not only hypervigilance, hyperarousal, and dissociation, but also severe and ongoing difficulty constructing logical and linear narratives. Although I am a white woman with a middle-class upbringing and the privilege that comes along with those identities, I see myself inside the discussion of duress. As Elizabeth Dutro points out in "Writing Wounded: Trauma, Testimony and Critical Witness in Literacy Classrooms," the discussion of trauma can easily become one in which the researcher discusses the student as "other":

The class-privileged assumptions that ascribe otherness to students and families living in poverty operate from an arm's length perspective, employing "those people" language both literally and figuratively. Such language . . . constructs a distinction of value among human beings creating an "us" and "them" that casts the middle class as the subjects and the poor as objects, thus perpetuating assumptions of deficiency in high-poverty families and communities. (208)

For that reason, I feel it's important to point out that I was once the aggravated student who stormed out and eventually dropped out, who refused

certain assignments, and who—when I finally returned to college—pent the first year hunting for classes in which I didn't have to write traditional essays because I found the process profoundly disorienting. Exposition assignments made it viciously clear to me that I couldn't organize my thinking, that I couldn't make sense.

My situation wasn't uncommon, especially for those experiencing duress. An important thing to understand about attention is that distraction is not a simple formula. It doesn't follow a pattern like: something troubling happened, so I'm thinking about that troubling thing instead of my schoolwork. The workings of the brain are complex and surprising. Of course, not everyone functions the same way when confronted with stressors. Some people go into a hyperfocus mode: organizing their homes and taking up new hobbies. Others can't remember a thing; they are scattered, and their house is a mess; they forget appointments or simple recipes that they once could call up from memory. These—and others—are simply different strategies for the brain to cope with new and distressing situations.

According to neuroscientists, when under stress our brains tend to eschew long-term decision making and instead evaluate the threats in our immediate environment. In a recent article on stress during the Coronavirus era, Laura Sanders explains that the prefrontal cortex, which controls executive functions like decision-making and focused attention, is impaired, or perhaps more accurately, "set aside," during times of stress, giving more "primitive structures," like the amygdalae center stage. These structures help us respond quickly to perceived threats. "Helpful if you're being faced with a snake," says Yale neuroscientist Amy Arnsten, "but not helpful if you're being faced with a complex . . . decision" (Sanders).

What's important here for writing teachers is that under stress we become worse at long-term planning but better at noticing our environment and taking rapid-fire action. We become, like Ray, concerned primarily with our surroundings—and the threats or immediate concerns of those surroundings. These aren't decisions we make about what we want to attend to; this is how brains generally function under stress. "In some sense," says Stanford University neuroscientist Anthony Wagner, "we're privileged when we're not stressed, [we are then] able to fully harness our cognitive machinery" (Sanders). While we rarely use one area of the brain or the other exclusively, when under stress, humans often respond largely to immediate environmental cues instead of planning for the future or evaluating our stored knowledge. This makes survival sense but may not fit neatly into some common expectations of writing assignments, which tend to depend upon evaluating stored knowledge and value linear narrative or cause-and-effect logic.

When something seemingly random happens, when outcomes are unpredictable due to a global pandemic, police violence, poverty, abuse or other violence, the logical structure of cause-and-effect is thwarted, cognitively speaking. And for those for whom violence and unpredictability has been the norm, some abstract idea of cause-and-effect may have never made sense at all. This relationship can and does carry on into the classroom. In other words: for writers experiencing duress, or for whom duress is the norm, the relationship between cause-and-effect can be confusing and logic itself can be fraught. One outcome is that the expository form, which tends to rely upon logic and cause-and-effect, can feel highly disorienting. After all, it is hard to make a sensible point in a linear fashion when life doesn't seem to be doing a writer the same favor.

Still, when we are in a state of urgency, we are more aware of our environment, and we are keen observers—a useful writing skill. For example, while it may be difficult to write long passages that rely upon (supposed) logic under extreme duress, details and sensory memories are often more clear in these situations. As psychologist and trauma researcher Bessel van der Kolk writes, “When memories cannot be integrated on a semantic/linguistic level, they tend to be organized in more primitive ways of information processing: as visual images or somatic sensations” (“Trauma and Memory” 102). In other words, most memories are fit into an existing semantic schemata, part of the “story of my life,” and once the memory is “placed” there, it isn't accessible as a memory separate from the rest of the story (“Trauma and Memory” 98). Memories of disturbing situations function quite differently. They are often purely sensory, without any semantic explanation attached. A memory of a low-stress situation might register as something like: “I sat on the couch in my neighbor's house with my brother, sweating like it was the middle of summer although it was Christmas Eve,” while the memory of a trauma would be feelings of being hot, flashes of the brother's face, flashes of the room and the daunting silence. This latter is exemplified in the following poem written by my student, Jonas, about the moments before his brother's murder:

Where's the money?
Sweat drips from my head like a cold bottle of water in a warm room.
We know where the money is. We know who took it.
But we sit in silence because we don't snitch. Ride or die.
That's the bro code.
The room is quiet and colorful almost like the botanical gardens.
But there is still no answer. There is still no code broken.
You took the fall for me.
My brother.
I write to you about a moment that made us truly family.

If only it was all a lie.

Traumatic memories are often isolated, not fitting into any existing story. When a narrative is constructed of the trauma, often years after the fact, the sensory memories are the basis of the story, and the plot is laced in, as opposed to the other way around. I did not, nor would I ever, ask Jonas to write about his brother. This was a low-stakes assignment in preparation for Essay One—the portrait of a word or phrase. Jonas’ phrase was “Ride or Die.” His engagement here shows us that professors can design assignments which ask students to write specific scenes and sensory memories as a way to engage and value those who may be skilled in these areas due to duress, or for any number of other reasons.

Finding Footholds

In discussing recovery from trauma, van der Kolk states the importance of “the feeling of being in charge, calm and able to engage in focused efforts to accomplish goals” (“Developmental Trauma Disorder” 408). The Conference on College Composition and Communication “DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice” frames this concept a bit differently: “Black students,” the demand reads, “need the kind of artful language instruction in which they are positioned as the linguistic mavens they are who can teach you a thing or two” (Baker-Bell et al.). The demand reminds us that when students are positioned as experts, they can find strength. Van der Kolk reminds us that this positioning—of having some knowledge and autonomy—brings people a sense of calm. Calm is especially valuable in times of duress but may also help any student having a difficult time finding a foothold in writing. From this place of strength and safety, writers can begin to take risks.

Providing an orienting structure to which students can refer when lost also gives them a possible foothold. Duress is profoundly untethering, and while choice can be empowering, it can also be unnerving if students have no idea of professor expectations, where to begin, or what to do if they are disoriented. One of my favorite examples of providing such a structure comes from the poet Yona Harvey, who I invited to visit the class I taught with the football students. Before she came, Professor Harvey asked the students to write to her telling her who their favorite superhero was. (This exercise was not tied to any particular essay, but to the students’ request that they be allowed to write poetry in class. We took a break from our regular curriculum one day for our esteemed guest). Here is Jonas’ email to Harvey, which did not stand out to me at the time, though the poem that arose from it draws me back to it for a closer reading:

Barry Allen, also known as the Flash, is a DC comic superhero and is secretly the second character to be called “the Flash.” [Flash’s] abilities allow him to travel at the speed of light and sometimes beyond the world’s limit. I chose this superhero because he relates to my everyday life, as speed and urgency play a huge role in it. Speed is required to play at the highest level in football, and urgency is needed to complete work academically as well as anything in life. Flash has always been my favorite superhero growing up as I was forced to choose a different superhero living in a household of five brothers.

Though I didn’t see it at the time, I can now see an undercurrent of his brother’s murder throughout: Allow him to travel beyond the world’s limit... speed and urgency...urgency... forced to choose...household of five brothers.

Professor Harvey had us read a series of epistolary poems to Superman by Lucille Clifton. The students then used the content of their emails to Professor Harvey and drew from Clifton’s poems as models to write poems to their superheroes. They wrote for about ten minutes. This is Jonas’ poem:

It’s funny how time seems to Flash,
One second you’re Barry
The next you’re flash.
You can travel through time,
but we both can’t change
the past, we both lost
a part of ourselves
but decide to keep on
running.

Jonas reported disliking writing—poetry in particular, though he admitted that he guessed he might be good at it. But while Jonas and the others complained about what they considered to be the rigid structures of essays, they had no such complaints about the structure of this assignment, perhaps in part because there was no penalty for breaking those rules. The assignment simply stood as a structure to consult should the disorientation of trauma or from an unfamiliar writing assignment make them feel too untethered. Whether or not Jonas liked writing this poem, it gave him a foothold from which to own his place in the classroom. And it also gave his classroom writing a life of its own outside the class; Harvey, with Jonas’ permission, hung it on her office wall.

Language itself, and especially joy with language, is another firm foothold for many writers. Students’ language systems have value. Professors should always acknowledge this, not just in word but in deed. As the “DEMAND

for Black Linguistic Justice” says “we cannot claim that Black Lives Matter in our field if Black Language does not matter!” (Baker-Bell et al.). To treat academic language or standard English as the pinnacle of linguistic usage and everything else as a bridge or low-stakes exercise toward that pinnacle not only reinforces white (language) supremacy but also knocks the ground out from under students trying to get a foothold on the page and at the university.

My policy is that students can write with whatever language they choose, as long as they write with care (and they write their own definition of care). My experience is that students thrive when they use language that makes them feel at home. Take the following example from Marshall, who hailed from South Florida. In essay three—the music review—he examined the language of musical group Migos, known for their somewhat inscrutable—and very Southern—lyrical style. (According to Marshall: “People say that the Migos be saying anything and niggas can’t understand them.”) He was specifically interested in the fact that Migos have power because they not only make a lot of money, but also because they make people learn to speak their language:

I could see why people be lost with it for real cuz they [Migos] from all the way down south and bringing that bih to the norf is a different way of life. Yes if you are thinking I grew up around this all my life swea it sound normal to me. You can talk this to anyone from the crib and they will know what you talm bout. It is called social identity and everyone has that no matter where they from.

From Marshall, we can see that encouraging students to enjoy being conversationalists, writers, readers, tweeters, poets, orators, trash-talkers, and listeners—in short, as budding masters of language—helps them pay attention to the language they use and the language around them. They can write however they think they will best reach their “audience invoked,” whoever that might be, but it doesn’t need to be the imagined scholars in Burke’s parlor—unless that is the crowd they are trying to invoke (Ede and Lunsford). The choice is the student’s. This kind of linguistic freedom is what allows students to see themselves as experts; it therefore opens avenues for a sense of calm confidence that moves past duress and into composition.

Deep Attending

What happens once students have gathered a collection of poems, fragments, and scenes—once they have practice attending and are working toward firm footing? How do we help them approach writing as the search for a coherent whole? First, instructors might use these smaller compositions as points for

larger, structured writing tasks, but I also suggest that, for some writers, the fragments may begin to organize themselves into a structure of their own.

When Frederic Jameson criticizes the language poets and other experimental writers, he describes their writing as “schizophrenic,” and hypothesizes that if:

the subject has lost its capacity actively to . . . organize its past and future into coherent experience, it becomes difficult to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but “heaps of fragments.” (qtd in Ngai 286)

But as Sianne Ngai points out, “anyone with agricultural, office, laundry or postal experience can attest [that] a heap *is* an organization, though perhaps not a particularly organized-looking one” (291). She argues that if we only allow pre-existing concepts of order to count as coherent, we bar ourselves from discovering new processes of linguistic adhesion, organization and meaning-making. Similarly, Aneil Rallin writes, “I hear a voice in my head pestering me, warning me not to lose focus, to stay on track. But I write. . . knowing that this emphasis on focus, on coherence may be what keeps us from noticing what is around us, may be what prevents us from writing” (625).

Perhaps if a student has written something seemingly incoherent, as is likely in situations of duress, we don’t ask them to clean up their mess but instead to make a bigger one. As the saying goes: One envelope on the ground is a mistake; twenty is a pile. The same may be true with paragraphs, scenes, or idea fragments. Perhaps looking for patterns in a student’s writing—what they find important, how they use and want to use language—is part of the work of the composition classroom, part of what Inoue calls “deep attending.” Inoue suggests we ask our students such questions as “Do I understand you enough? Am I making you suffer? Please help me to read your languaging properly.” This, he points out, is a process that combats the white supremacist ideologies that permeate and organize our classrooms. Instead of trying to figure out how a student’s writing fits into some pre-ordained structure or framework, we look with the student at the writing they are doing and see what structures and frameworks emerge. I argue that we should read student writers the same way we read experimental writers, putting the onus on ourselves as readers to find meaning in their texts or bodies of work.

An example: Victor wrote in heaps of fragments that I didn’t initially understand. In essay three, in which I asked students to write about an historical event important to contemporary audiences, Victor wrote about the movie *Scarface*. Though his essay began with a few sentences describing the history of the Cuban embargo, it was difficult to figure out how his paper related to the prompt. His essay read like an off-the-top-of-his-head synopsis of the

movie's plot, as in the following: "Tony starts off in a refugee camp in Florida where him and his right hand man Manny were located." Victor goes on to describe Tony's rise to power: "Manny realizes something is wrong and kills the Columbians. When one tries to escape Tony chases him into the street with pedestrians all around. He doesn't care and guns him down in front of everyone." If we attend more closely, however, we can see that these snippets—as with the paper more generally—concentrate both on gun violence and Tony's dedication to his family. Victor writes: "Tony's little sister and him haven't seen each other in years and he does not know how to handle her being so grown up." Victor never analyzes either of these phenomena, simply choosing to mention them and then move on. Nor does he describe Tony's eventual murder, only his dead body "shown under a statue of a globe saying 'the world is yours.'" Looking back, I see the essay contained what I now know are themes that Victor would write about regularly: family, particularly his sister and his mother, and an exploration of gun violence. While it looked like he was brushing the assignment off, it turns out that he was looking for a foothold to write about an event that was extremely difficult for him to discuss which did, in fact, begin with *Scarface*.

In a conference, I asked him the only question that came to mind: why he'd decided to write about *Scarface*. He answered quietly, but matter-of-factly: "My uncle always told me that when he went out, he wanted to go out like Scarface, and he did. He got gunned down that same way." He then proceeded to tell me the story of his uncle's murder, and then his cousin's murder, and then his brother's murder in calm, excruciating detail. "But my uncle was the first one," he said. There have been times I have simply told students that what they wrote was unacceptable and they needed to start again. I am lucky I didn't do it that day, but instead had the wherewithal to ask Victor the simple question: "Why Scarface?" and then listen to his answer, take Inoue's advice, and attend to Victor's experiences.

It seems to me now that because the event Victor really wanted to write about—a workplace shooting in his family history which had become news, and then part of the history of his hometown—was so difficult for him, he did not know where to begin. He also may have had trouble focusing on the assignment's more logic-driven goals, in light of the difficulty of his situation. I do know that Victor was doing everything he could to get anything down on the page. He reported struggling with logical and linear connections—not only between the assignment and his story, but between the scenes of the story itself. He was trying to pay attention; he was trying to figure out what I wanted him to do. But he also really was trying to write about *Scarface*. It would be easy to call this first paper a failure...or we could attend differently, more deeply, and see it as a foothold.

In a conference, we decided a good starting place would be for Victor to write a scene about the discussion he and his uncle had about *Scarface*. We then decided he could continue to write more scenes that seemed pertinent to the story of his uncle, using the concrete scene skills we had been working on in class. The research portion of the essay would be from newspapers at the time; reading the papers might make a second scene. After he'd written the scenes, he could figure out what order he wanted to put them in. In other words, he would make a heap of fragments.

When it came time that revisions were due, Victor's was missing. The next time I saw him, I told him I needed the essay as soon as possible, but he told me he had been gone due to a memorial for the anniversary of his brother's murder. He told his tutor he had changed his mind; he was going to write about something else, but I could not understand what his new topic was. In the following class, I told Victor he'd have to come meet with me to talk about the new topic. Instead, he announced, "I did it," and shoved the revised paper into my hand. Here is how it began:

Summers in South Brunswick, New Jersey were always the same for me. Driving through town with windows down, staring at the green grass and trees around. Or riding with a few friends blasting music trying to find our next move in the day. What I remember more than anything is countless days of being outside with the sun beaming off my helmet, the sweat dripping off my jersey, and struggling to find comfort in my cleats because the turf felt like hot cement.

I was struck then, as I am now, by the vividness of these first few lines. Notice, too, the vibrancy and rhythm of the descriptions. Next, he zooms in on a particular day football practice in 6th grade:

Practice was going smooth and everything seemed to be going great when all of a sudden a loud pitch scream from a distance caught my attention. [My mom] was the person who had screamed. The fields were spray painted onto a regular open grass plain behind the town's middle school. My mom was behind one of the far fields.

The diction here unfolds by the second, like we're with him when he pieces together where the scream is coming from—whom it is coming from—and we dwell with him, for a second, while we listen to this horrible screaming, on the strange detail of spray paint on grass. This reads as the sensory detail of extreme duress that van der Kolk refers to, remembered almost out of time, which feels both distant and present.

The paragraph about *Scarface* follows immediately after he finds his mother:

In July before the start of football that year, my family . . . was having a big cookout with a DJ in New Brunswick at my aunt's house. It started around 3 and all my cousins and family were there. I was sitting with my sister most of the night because I felt too young to hang out with my older cousins and dance with them plus I was shy. With the salsa music blasting there were plenty of my family dancing around the yard. My uncle Tata was grilling, drinking and having fun. Whenever my family members talk, it would never be a normal conversation, they yell and have shouting matches so no one can get a word in. In one group of my uncles they were talking and I can remember my uncle shouting, "when I go out, I wanna go out like Scarface!" Later that day after the cookout I asked my mom what he meant by that and she simply told me its from a movie I'm not allowed to watch, so of course I watched it later that day. Seeing all the violence and drugs involved and seeing how it ended, I couldn't understand why he would joke about going out like him. But it was how my uncle was, he was a tough hard working and passionate man.

Narratively, we have gone from his mother's screams to the shouts, cheerful now but just as loud, of the party. In the paragraph after this description, with no hint of transition, the tone changes. Like a reporter, Victor finally tells us about the murder:

In Bristol, Pennsylvania, a man by the name of Robert Diamond was fired from his job. . . . He was fired because he was accused of being racist and was uncooperative with his coworkers. . . .His plan was to kill his boss, who was black, and anyone else black who came in his way. On August 1, 2008, Robert Diamond drove around for about an hour before pulling up to his old workplace. My uncle was Puerto Rican and seemed to fit the profile. . . . Robert Diamond opened fire from a distance. My uncle was hit a couple times and he stopped the car. My uncle was hurt badly and he punched the car door open. However, for some reason, my uncle did not try to run. He looked his shooter in the eye and began trying to walk towards him. He could not walk for long and collapsed to the pavement. The shooter stood over Angel Guadalupe, and shot him until he was not moving anymore. . . . The shooter planned everything out. Even the shirt he was wearing said "stupidity is not a crime." . . . My uncle was a brave man, and the way he faced his killer in his last moments shows me what kind of man he was. He went out like a man, like he wanted to, he went out like he said, just like Scarface.

My attention is drawn to a number of things about this essay. Of course, I'm prompted to attend to the horror of the story, the racism and senselessness, but my attention is also drawn to the vividness of detail, both remembered and imagined: the cleats on concrete, the dominoes game, the salsa music, the "stupidity is not a crime" t-shirt, Victor's description of his uncle's death as though he were there. We can see the awareness of the environment that those who have experienced trauma often possess. At the same time, we see Victor's difficulty constructing a linear narrative. But there is value in that difficulty.

In fact, what emerges from that struggle is a fragmented but sophisticated structure apt for the telling of this event: summer days in New Jersey, a particular summer day in New Jersey, an unexplained scream, a party with an uncle who "wants to go out like Scarface," news-like reporting of the murder of that uncle dying like Scarface, and, later and omitted from my excerpt here, a scene of Victor bringing food to his mother after school because for months she wouldn't leave her bed. The essay does end wrapped in a bow, with a final pro-death penalty paragraph, arguing for the execution of his uncle's murderer: "I believe that if criminals know they will be put to death before murdering someone else, they will hesitate to do the crime." Otherwise, the jarring jump from scene to scene is both more heartbreaking and makes more emotional sense than a chronologically linear narrative might.

One of the main things to note about Victor's essay, and the process by which he arrived at it, is that we can see the strengths he has as a writer are consistent with the difficulties of attention and memory under duress. Victor doesn't follow a traditional, logical, expository essay structure because his life has not, at least the way he described it to me, moved seamlessly from thesis to point to conclusion. But there is a logic to his writing. The strength of this essay is in the form of the jarring chronology of the events as he experienced them, in the vividness of sometimes unwanted details barreling in at inopportune moments. The narrative chaos, the way the essay jumps around in time, the way screams emerge from seemingly nowhere and then disappear into laughter and salsa music, which then disappears into gunfire: this the way crisis works on human attention.

Conclusion

As writing teachers oriented to deep attention, perhaps we can see that Victor found his foothold in talking about *Scarface*, that he built on that foothold by writing a heap of fragments held together by urgency and vivid detail, that he organized those fragments into an order using a logic of his own. To see this, however, writers need to gather multiple fragments of their writing together to find patterns in the seemingly disconnected low-stakes assignments, journal entries and drafts they do throughout a semester—what themes emerge?

What threads run through the writing they do week after week? As professors, teachers, and writers ourselves, we need to pile more and more fragments onto that heap, “message fragments,” in cartoonist and writer Lynda Barry’s words, “we may not recognize until we have enough of them to understand. Liking and not liking,” she goes on to say, can orient our attention away from what is there (12–13).

In college, I could not avoid writing essays forever, so I had to develop a process that worked for me. I started by scribbling each idea and pertinent quote down on an individual index card and rearranging the cards in piles on the floor until the groups made sense. These groups became paragraphs. Then I wrote, by hand, at least two drafts before I started to type. I still handwrite at least two drafts when I compose. Working this way borders on the ridiculous, but this is the process that works for me. I still need to find ways to organize the noisy thoughts zipping around in my brain. I am not very different from some of my students this way.

Which returns us to the question: how is Ray supposed to look at a little piece of paper when someone might be coming at him? How are our students supposed to look at little computer screens when they are worried about the pandemic or the police? The answer is that there isn’t an easy answer. I get my foothold by calming myself with a process full of physical busywork. Jonas gets his foothold through vivid scenes, Marshall through love of language and Victor through telling a story at the periphery of the story he really wants to tell. Everyone has their own way onto the page, and we need curricula capacious enough that students can find processes that work for them, no matter how counterintuitive they may seem to the instructor. The concepts of understanding attention, finding footholds and deep attending are a good start for the study of literacy learning under duress, but they’re only a start. There is a great deal of room for research into the relationship between attention and learning—what draws students away from a little piece of paper and what draws students, even under duress, to that paper? These are crucial questions to ask as writing instructors try to figure out how to best serve students during this crisis and beyond it.

Notes

1. All student names have been changed and all student writing has been used with permission and IRB approval. At the beginning of the second semester, I asked students to fill out a form stating whether or not I could use their writing for my research and future publication. Those who agreed to let me use their writing received no benefits, nor did those who refused receive any penalties.

2. Though Lanham went on to write a book by the same name (*The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information*), he was not the first to discuss

attentional economics. In 1971, economist Herbert A. Simon pointed out that an influx of information created a “poverty of attention” (Simon 40).

3. I have eschewed discussions of ADHD in this article because individual diagnoses are not of particular interest to this discussion. In the words of McDermott et al in “The Cultural Work of Learning Disabilities,” I am less interested in labels and more interested in the “cultural arrangements that make a . . . label relevant” (13).

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