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Stories That Teach Gentleness:

How Gentleness Can Impact the Teaching of Difficult Content

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Introduction

This thesis aims to examine how storytellers with trauma are telling their audiences about how to care for their stories and how approaching these stories in the classroom, while important, needs to be done with a sense of gentleness for all involved. To do this, Carol Gilligan's *In a Human Voice*, Sylvia Wynter's *On Being Human as Praxis*, and Sarah Truman's "Inhuman literacies and affective refusals" will be used as theoretical frames to examine Hannah Gadsby's Nannette and my poetry within these concepts. Additionally, a disability justice lens will be applied to situate these and similar stories in the English classroom, focusing on the teacher's approach, or affect, rather than a classroom setup or technique. Because some of the topics I cover may be difficult, in the words of Margaret Price, "please do what you need [...] to take care of yourself" (as qtd. in Kafer 5).

In this text, "gentleness" comes from pedagogies of care, but avoids the word "care" because of its connections to "caretaking" or "carework," where teachers may feel an additional pressure to work harder[1] (as opposed to approaching the work differently) for students that don't interact with their class in a normative way. Following Anne-Marie Womack's theorization of accommodation as "the most basic act and art of teaching," this work acknowledges that all students will approach a class differently and teachers, particularly those addressing difficult subject matter, should expect to accommodate students with and without institutionally recognized disabilities. Because all classroom norms were once accommodations, it is important to recognize that those accommodations may end up benefiting all students and even the professor themself (494). Teaching with gentleness is intended to imply a more "hands off" approach to care that makes space for the student to exist in the ways necessary for them, which can come in the form of refusals or unexpected approaches to course content. Ideally, students

[1] "I know most people try hard / to do good and find out too late / they should have tried softer" (Gibson, lines 1-3).

should feel comfortable coming to their professor with issues of access in order to collaborate on solutions to their needs, rather than suffering in silence.

Seemingly opposed to this idea of a gentle teacher is the idea of a rigorous course. What qualifies a course to be "rigorous" in an academic setting? Is it the quality of the work submitted, the struggle of the student in completing it, a mixture of the two, or something else entirely? Is struggling a requirement of the course? Additionally, within the traditional school setting, there is the constant force of the teacher-student power dynamic. By nature of their position, teachers control the pacing of the course and the grades assigned to students' interactions with their assignments based on a variety of factors—weighted according to instructor preference—such as word count, timeliness, and the quality of the work. The overall grade of a student's coursework in that 6-16 week period becomes part of their GPA, which can impact students beyond their transcript and the walls of the classroom.

This dynamic becomes particularly important when difficult subject matter depicting racism, sexism, homophobia, violent acts, etc. are brought into the classroom. There is no question that these topics need to be discussed in the classroom, particularly while politicians criticize—or even censor—conversations about race, gender, and other topics that are important to think, speak, and write about while weaponizing schools against the transgender and greater queer community (Demillo and Callahan; Kam). However, these topics can be approached in ways that cause unintentional harm to students. In the humanities, the way we talk about stories is important. In the classroom, the way conversations are facilitated and approached is important.

Comedy's Place in Conversations About Humanity and Connection

Hannah Gadsby's Netflix comedy special, *Nannette*, initially filmed in Australia became very popular and debated both in their home country and in the United States. Through *Nannette*,

Gadsby argues that the toxic public discourse over the decriminalization of homosexuality in 1990's Tasmania, repeated around the 2017 vote to allow gay marriage in Aulstrailia, created a homophobic environment that made them more vulnerable to shame. Gadsby does this by revising their old "Gay Comic 101" stories of coming out to their family and being attacked at a bus stop, explaining that they need to change the way they tell their own stories. Gadsby also argues that the violence and trauma caused by these politicized conversations can be cured by placing the focus of the stories we tell on connection, rather than disconnection or personal reputation. Instead of stopping at the punchline like they used to, Gadsby pushes past it to tell complete stories. They shifted the focus of their old stories away from the half-truths that hid harsh realities in order to appeal to the humanity of their audience, rather than just their humor.

Like many, Gadsby knew they were gay from a young age, but remained closeted for over a decade because politicians and news media at the time of their adolescence covered discussions about the morality of homosexuality in a negative and inflammatory light. Gadsby described their time in the closet as "soaking in shame," informing the audience that this prevents them from developing "the neurological pathways that carry thoughts of self-worth." Gadsby, having been out for years now, tells the audience about their mother's response to their coming out, she said: "you didn't have to tell me that," comparing it to confessing to being a "murderer." Retelling the story and always stopping at the punchline, froze that story "at the trauma point," preventing growth (Gadsby). Because of those jokes, they didn't recognize as the story proceeded past that point and into the good relationship they have with their mother today.

Now, the two joke about that time in a healthy way. Gadsby articulates this new relationship through the story of a more recent visit with their mom; she suddenly brought up her pride in how she raised her kids. When Gadsby jokingly asked what she wasn't proud of; their

mothers response was heartfelt: “The thing I regret is that I raised you as if you were straight. I didn’t know any different. I am so sorry. I knew that your life was going to be so hard. I made it worse. Because I wanted you to change because I knew the world wouldn’t.” Combined, the stories show how Gadsby’s mother learned to view them as more human, more natural, through exposure as they grew to have a more open and loving relationship. The impact the politics of the time had on how their relationship developed cannot be understated.

Another story Gadsby told for much of their career revolves around a confrontation they had with a homophobic man at a bus stop. They were talking to a woman when the man came up to them angrily—thinking they were a man hitting on his girlfriend—and called them a homophobic slur until the woman stopped him, saying “it’s a girl.” The man, saying he doesn't “hit women,” calmed down and left. Before *Nannette*, Gadsby would stop there, joking that he shouldn’t hit anyone, but later in this set, they return to the story. Gadsby reveals that the man came back, having realized that they’re a masculine lesbian, and assaulted them. That violence was gendered because Gadsby was “incorrectly female.” Closing the story, they state that they didn’t report the assault to the police or go to the hospital because they “thought that was all [they were] worth.” As a person who grew up being told their love was a crime, Gadsby had enough shame that, upon being attacked for their identity, did not believe they deserved justice or care. Gadsby puts it very succinctly: “That is what happens when you soak one child in shame and give permission to another to hate.” Gadsby’s internalization of the homophobia around them and the man’s homophobia, modeled in politics, led to that interaction and conclusion.

In an extended set of jokes about art history, Gadsby brings up what they were taught about Picasso, and what the stories we tell about him teach us. Through the story, they show the audience that the focus of history has been on mens reputations. In the art world, Picasso is

revered for creating cubism, complicating the art world's views on perception by trying to show subjects through many perspectives, rather than from a single point. However, what is left unsaid, Gadsby notes, is his misogyny. Because of his contributions to art, Picasso's views on women and his treatment of them is ignored. To illustrate this, Gadsby brings up the relationship he had with a seventeen year old girl "in her prime" while he was in his "prime" as a forty-two year old married man, and points to a quote of Picasso's about women: "Each time I leave a woman, I should burn her. Destroy the woman, you destroy the past she represents." Despite wanting to paint from all the perspectives, he did not value those of the women around him. The misogyny of the time, still lingering today, allowed for those perspectives to be further silenced as our cultural "obsession with reputation" allowed his misogyny to be ignored in favor of his reputation for cubism, a common theme for celebrities. They argue that the stories we tell about celebrities become part of our collective history and the way we view the world, and the moral of the stories we have been telling is that we value mens reputations above their humanity.

Near the end of the show, Gadsby refers back to the stories they've shared about their personal life and the Piccaso quote. Referring to the quote, Gadsby says "I will not allow my story to be destroyed." There aren't many stories like Gadsby's out there, particularly not in 2018, and there is still an unspoken expectation for minorities in comedy to use self-deprecation to reach a majority audience. If they had not taken steps to protect their story, it would be lost to the self-deprecating/self-humiliating humor that they had built their career on as the lives of queer people were already on public trial. In telling their story fully, Gadsby proves their story has value, and in telling it, they want those like them "To feel less alone. To feel connected."

Gadsby finishes their set by stating that Picasso was right: "we could paint a better world if we learned to see it from all perspectives," because "difference is a teacher," their argument is

that his mistake was assuming he could represent everyone. Gadsby closes with a final call to action: as a community, we need to be better about taking care of one anothers stories and pursuing connection. Through the story of Vincent van Gogh, Gadsby points out that his success was because “he had a brother that cared about him,” who ensured he was taken care of despite his illness. They argue that connection and caring for one another needs to be the focus of the stories we tell about the world and our history, not stories built to protect reputations.

Handling Stories Gently

Nannette shows the attempts of a storyteller to approach telling their story in a manner that was uncommon for queer comics of the time, but allowed them to tell their story in a more fulfilling way. I was eighteen when *Nannette* came out—a year older than Gadsby when they learned about Picasso. To this day, Gadsby’s words: “What I would have done to have heard a story like mine” still echo in my head. At the time, I was wrapping my own coming out story into jokes I still sometimes tell today, though *Nannette* has taught me not to let the jokes become the only way I see those stories. Acknowledging and living through the pain of those times alongside the people I was with, like my support group for survivors, was part of how I learned to be the person I am today. They taught me how to hold others' stories without taking on their problems as my own, and to be gentle with myself and my stories.

Near the end of their set, when explaining why they need to “quit comedy,” or at least the kind of comedy they had been doing, Gadsby acknowledges the power of a comedian to create connection through anger, sadness, or laughter. They remark that, though we often say that laughter is medicine, it isn’t; “stories hold our cure” when focused on connection, “laughter is just the honey that sweetens the bitter medicine.” In telling their story fully, Gadsby doesn’t stop at the punchline for entertainment. They offer something more to their audience: a chance at

genuine connection. They tell their story because the full story has value to those that don't understand them and to those who understand them all too well. Carrying these stories in a society that allows these violences is difficult, and those that don't understand are numb to the pain. As their right to marry was in question, Gadsby told their story in a way that replaced the numbers their audience, many of them straight, saw in the news with a human face and jokes that were more than self-deprecation.

Gadsby tells the audience "your story is my story and my story is your story" and asks them to "please, help me take care of my story" near the end of their set. By asking their audience to understand what it means to be a "not-normal" living in a society that doesn't value them, Gadsby asks the audience to recognize their humanity by hearing their story. In a field where stories are important, how we study and take care of them should be closely examined. Through their stories, Gadsby argues that public discourse about sensitive issues impacting people's everyday lives and identities need to be handled with a sense of care, or gentleness, because our stories are interconnected and become part of our collective/communal memories as we tell and retell them. We are part of one big village, and how we care for our stories matters.

The Importance of Poetry

I include my poetry in this project because it's part of how I have come to know the world, both as someone who wants to teach and as someone who carries trauma. In the words of Audry Lorde, "every poem I create is an attempt at a piece of truth formed from the images of my experience" (Lorde, "Poet as Teacher," 182). Two of the poems I have included come from a project that uses transcripts from conversations with my aunt, Carolyn, as a source text to create poems. By including my poetry in this project, I compare some of the stories that have shaped me and my perceptions of both gentleness and teaching to Gadsby's stories, reading them

through lenses that prioritize the stories we tell and the voices we use to tell them. These stories also work to introduce my village of origin, my family, to the project and show how gentleness has informed my past classroom experiences.

We aren't taught to be gentle. Not in the classroom; if we're lucky, we learn it from our family. I learned to be gentle with myself and others through poetry and my support group. Poetry gave me pieces of others' experiences to learn from and time to sit with and digest my own. During a time when my life didn't feel like my own, bouncing from one trigger to the next, my support group allowed me to connect with others who carry trauma and taught me strategies for coping with PTSD. In writing, thinking, and existing around gentleness, I want to "dare to make real (or bring action into accordance with)" this sense of being that has allowed me to live more fully in my life by connecting it with the work I want to do: teaching (Lorde, "Poetry," 66).

Wynter's idea of *homo narrans* theorizes that humans are storytelling creatures, meaning that we have evolved alongside our ability to share stories. She builds this idea, in part, from Aimé Césaire's proposed *human scientific* order of knowledge, his hypothesis that "poetic knowledge is born of the great silence of scientific knowledge" and that, "when the study of the word will condition the study of nature," humanity will have a more full understanding of itself and the the world as a whole (as qtd. in Wynter 64-65). In other words, the knowledge we gain from the experience and stories of others through poetry and prose will give humanity better insight into the world around us as humans and researchers.

Gentleness in My Poetry and My Teaching Genealogy

One of the core complications of this project are the seemingly competing ideas of rigor versus access, particularly in cases where students are approaching difficult subject matter during coursework. To work through this complication, this text uses Sarah Truman's idea of the

"inhuman," stemming from Wynter's ideas being put into practice at the classroom level, to explore how teachers may navigate a rigorous class that explores difficult topics. Additionally, the idea of "gentleness," an attempt at making space for the inhuman student, one who does not approach the classroom in a normative way, will be used to think through ways of approaching difficult topics in the classroom in a manner that is ethical towards students despite the existing teacher-student dynamic of a traditional classroom.

In my own life, I've seen the impact of an unsupportive environment on myself and in my friends' lives. I wanted to write this thesis before a shooting happened at the sister institution to my campus, UNLV, to which I have close family ties, but that event solidified my resolve. It impacted me negatively, both as a student and a student-worker, likely because I was on the clock at my university's writing center when it happened. In addition to those tragedies that make the news, there are the everyday personal tragedies that students experience while going to school. After the UNLV shooting, my experiences with gun violence were brought back to the forefront of my mind. I remembered worrying about my old math teacher because he didn't come in the day after the Route 91 shooting. I remembered going to class the day after being robbed at my old workplace, because I wanted a sense of normalcy and I was always taught "school comes first." I remembered doing homework from a hotel room after my ex-roommate had threatened the lives of myself and the others I lived with. I had to take a moment to process my professor saying "Let's just lean in and go off duty," hours after the UNLV shooting as the sadness was starting to set in and we decided to cancel the meeting for this proposal.

As discussions about the transgender community have made the news, I remembered the letter the parent of one of my oldest friends sent to his teachers in high school, asking them not to use his chosen name and pronouns; I remembered him telling me that, despite his full-ride

scholarship to a conservative college, he “paid for it with [his] mental health” because of his professors comments about his transition. I remembered my old therapist telling me my status as a survivor could be a cause of my dysphoria. It is important to talk about these issues in the classroom because their effects are far-reaching and long-lasting, but remembering that students may have personal ties to these issues is essential for ensuring those students feel safe and welcome during these discussions.

When I was initially drafting the “Father’s Day” poem,[2] I was thinking about a Father’s Day when my mother and sister were out of town and my brother didn’t drive in from Arizona; my sister left him a card with my and my brother's forged signatures. I was the only kid that came to see him. In writing “Father’s Day,” I wanted men to feel seen, sad, and even angry reading it. Like Hannah Gadsby says in *Nannette*: men need better role models.

My father has never been a very gentle man. The references to his calloused hands and the dialogue in the poem point to that; he’s good at fixing appliances and protecting us, but he’s never been one to worry about how he impacts others. My father’s greatest pride is that he’s the “manliest man you’ll ever meet.” He is a master carpenter and jack-of-all-trades; he’s intelligent, but never did well in school because of his dyslexia. Instead of pushing for accommodations, his mother, a school psychologist, would tell his teachers to pass him because they “didn’t want him in their class again.” He would skip grades and be held back in alternating years. During high school, he only went to his trade classes. He started heavy construction and framing houses, where he got into hard drugs. He was married and divorced before he got into carpentry, met my mother and built a new life with her. He got off drugs around the time I was born, but has been an active alcoholic all my life; I grew up hearing stories about his drug use. It felt normal, but we also knew better than to talk about his drinking with anyone outside the home.

[2] Located in Appendix A

By comparison, the poem "Gentleman"[3] comes from a series of poems I've been creating using transcripts of conversations with my aunt, Carolyn. Her father was a banker and her mother a binge drinker who taught first grade. She speaks of her father as "a gentle man" and spoke of the care he put into his role as a father. He still disciplined his kids, as shown in that final scene where he called my aunt and she ran, but she was never afraid of him. She has said that her feelings about her father are very "simple," while those she has about her mother are "complicated." Her father's gentleness may have allowed her to advocate for herself and know her strength. In the same project, the poem "Women's Work"[4] furthers and complicates this sense of "gentleness" through Carolyn's description of her sister-in-law, Louise, mathematics teacher born in 1919; she grew up doing housework on a family farm. Carolyn describes her as having a "gentle personality," which gave her a different approach to the world. While her personality meant she didn't always stand up for herself and likely came from a childhood spent "Waiting on her brothers," her gentleness never prevented her from being a good teacher.

I see the same kind of gentleness that Louise embodied in my mother, a truly wonderful first grade teacher. Alongside this transcript-to-poetry project, I have an interview with my mother that details some of her childhood experiences growing up in Las Vegas. She grew up with her parents, some siblings, and extended family living with addiction. In seeing her teach and interact with students, having done formal interviews with her for past education classes, and generally discussing teaching with her, I can see how her past experiences have made her more gentle with her students. My mom has told me that if a parent speaks poorly about their child, she might shift to the more positive aspects of their file, I think because she worries the parents might hurt the student if they aren't doing well, or aren't good enough students.

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[3] Located in Appendix B
[4] Located in Appendix C

At the same time that my father isn't very gentle and doesn't always feel safe, he has always been a protector, almost to the point of going overboard. In "Father's Day," I write about going to haunted houses with him. I think feeling needed as a protector is why he always looks for them in amusement parks. The line in the poem that I have very mixed feelings about is where I quote my father after I'd just cut my hair short. He called me a "bull-dyke" and said I'd "never get a job." As that poem presents it, the line is both protective and harmful. My father was deeply upset by my becoming visibly queer because he knows it can draw the wrong kind of attention. The next few lines of dialogue in that stanza speak to the first conversation I had with him after I'd been robbed and our conversation during the Father's Day the poem centers around. Like Gadsby's mother, I think he worried that my queerness would make my life harder, and he wanted me to change because the world wouldn't. Like Gadsby, it only made me feel like I didn't deserve good things, so when I'm hurting, I don't always believe I deserve better or that I deserve rest. In learning to be gentle with myself, I have learned to take care of myself.

These poems touch on some of the feelings I have around the village I come from. My village of origin taught me to be silent, to keep family secrets, and to have a healthy sense of distrust around those meant to care for or help me. Places like my support group and classes that discussed stories of trauma have helped solidify the idea that the secrecy, silence, and judgment I come from isn't normal or healthy. In telling stories like the ones in these poems, I have been able to break learned silences in a format that allowed me to take the time needed to be brave. In the teaching that I want to do, I want to give students the opportunity to be (in)human in my classroom without causing them harm. While there will never be a perfect classroom, showing students that I am trying to be gentle with these stories, even if I do it imperfectly, will let them know that the stories they bring to the classroom matter.

The Human Voice in the Classroom

Educators in the humanities focus on and study stories. The way students read and interact with stories in the classroom is different from how they would interact with stories elsewhere and outside of the role of a student. In addition to seeking to learn from the texts, students experience these texts in the context of the classroom power dynamic. Teachers have control over the timing of texts during the course and the grades assigned to the students' interactions with them. *On Being Human as Praxis* and *In a Human Voice* both speak about how people learn how to be and define "human." As educators, teachers want to hear their students' voices—their true and human voices—in the classroom.

The authors all discuss initiation as a process that organizes the ways in which people interact with the world around them. Wynter names origin myths as the "the storytelling 'grounds' of the institution of initiation" (Wynter 25). Initiation is the process by which members of a community start to recognize themselves and their place in it; Wynter states that the initiated become "kin-recognizing member subjects of the same *referent-we* and its imagined community," beginning to perform their community's definition of "good men and women" (Wynter 27). Through initiation, the stories learned to explain the world around us become the lens through which we see everything, including who "we" refers to in our specific cultural context. Looking outside of that lens becomes nearly impossible, even in the case of those who are dehumanized by that lens. This initiation can be achieved through the stories and ideals a person learns from parents, friends, family, and their schooling, which is why the stories we tell in these places and the way we approach them as people with power is important.

Gilligan specifically discusses the trauma of gendered initiation in the context of children in the U.S. from a psychological lens. As children grow up and become their assigned genders,

they learn which behaviors are expected of them and how to silence their natural, or "human," voice in order to make way for a voice their community expects from them. Phrasing initiation into gender roles as a trauma that causes change in children, Gilligan, borrows and re-interprets a term from Sandor Ferenczi,[5] noting that "when a voice that protests and resists is silenced, the stage is set for a confusion of tongues," referencing abused children who eventually identify with the voices of their aggressors after experiencing "their own voice as ineffective" (8). As children grow into adulthood, they learn when to say some things and when to keep quiet about others. With stories of trauma in particular, they learn to hide parts of themselves in order to make the stories more palatable to those around them, similar to the silences I learned from my family.

Gilligan's work *In a Human Voice* asks "why we accommodate to a culture that compromises our humanity" (26) and explains, in the same vein as Wynter, that the norms and stories we grow up around teach us who is correctly "human" and how to *other* those—including ourselves—that don't fit into that narrow view of what it means to be "human" correctly. In the humanities classroom, we seek to understand ourselves, cultures, and other individuals through stories. If our work includes the struggle "to move beyond the knee-jerk limits of the *Us* and the *Them,*" humanizing both the teacher and the student by valuing the experiences they bring to the classroom is a good start (Wynter 49). Being an academic should not mean you can't be yourself.

The Inhuman Voice in the Classroom

Engaging with Wynter's idea of *homo narrans,* Sarah Truman attempts to create an "inhuman" approach to literacy education. Truman states that "'inhuman' emphasizes both difference and intimacy" through the prefix "in-," which works to denote "difference from something while at the same time being within something as an intimacy" (113), a positioning

[5] From the chapter "Confusion of Tongues Between Adults and the Child" in the book *Final Contributions to the Problems and Methods of Psycho-analysis* (156-167).

that's captured by Gadsby's description of being a "not-normal" in public while still acknowledging that these students are very connected to the world around them. The inhuman in an English classroom may have a hard time approaching certain assignments because they, like Gadsby, want to tell their story properly, but may not have the words for it yet.

When a classroom is based in rubrics and assessment technology that places the focus on measuring certain aspects of rigor in a particular manner, the humanity of teachers and students who share stories and their responses to stories seems to be lost. Rob Simon asks what would happen if teachers "shift their responses from fidelity to assessment instruments towards increased attentiveness and responsibility to student writers?" (117). Truman's inhuman approach to literacy education attempts to answer the question through a research-creation project that did not focus on "*improving* or *assessing* student writing," but instead "explored ethico-political matters of concern that arose during [their] walking, reading and writing practices" (118). These ethico-political matters can be difficult to talk and write about for those personally impacted by them, and have the potential to impact a student's assessed engagement with their classes.

The particular moment from that class that Truman chooses to place her attention on is the time spent with Abida, a student who didn't write her poem in a normative way. After reading William Blake's poem *London,* Abida said "I want to write about race, but I don't want to write about race," and Truman responded with "Okay, we can wait," choosing to view the refusal as part of the work Abida did for the poem (119) instead of a more assessment-based response that may have insisted Truman take off points for a late submission. This refusal was later impacted as Abida observed Ramadan, feeling hungry and thirsty as she and the class walked around; eventually, after another conversation between student and teacher, Abida decided to write at home around 4:00 am after eating for the day (121). These simple acts of

communication gave Abida more access to the class than she would have had in a traditional setting. Instead of writing any poem to turn in during the expected timeframe, doing what was expected of her in that moment and nothing more, Abida was allowed to write the poem according to her own timeline and discuss a topic she was deeply connected to on her own terms.

These negotiations around difficult subject matter happen in every classroom that covers these topics, though it may be hard to find without searching. In particular, discussions around warning students about potentially graphic or disturbing materials have been strongly debated over the years. Critics argue that these warnings "serve as a kind of 'censor's tool,' foreclosing debate and restricting the topics of conversation," and that they encourage, students to "bypass material that challenges them," others argue that these warnings are "about *accessing* the material, not censoring or avoiding it" (Kafer). Difficult topics are important to discuss in the English classroom because of the stories that they hold and the need to remember the histories involved, but is a warning equivalent to a news story's "viewer discretion is advised" an act of censorship? While "trigger warnings" or "content warnings" do not ensure a fully "safe" classroom that is free from stressors, there is rhetorical work done through them. It contributes to Mia Mingus's idea of "access intimacy," or a kind of closeness with others that allows people to feel "a little bit safer and at ease with" asking for their access needs to be met ("The Missing Link") and allows students to consent to engage with these topics while opening the floor to communication with their professors about any difficulties they have with that engagement.

As an example, one of my highschool classes featured a text that involved marital rape; the husband forced himself on his wife while she slept. The teacher never mentioned the scenes before assigning us the novel or the chapter where it first occurred. As a student and survivor in that setting, I felt uncomfortable from the moment I read the page, and when I informed the

teacher that "this happened to me" and that I was having a hard time continuing with the novel, I was told I needed to "let go of some of [my] personal beliefs" when reading for class. Their advice to ignore experiences connected to my PTSD led me to conclude that the teacher did not feel my experience mattered in their classroom. Later, during a Socratic Seminar,[6] the students debated if the character's actions "counted" as rape. The person I was then embodied the idea that in public school, "most of us learn that it's best to just keep your head down, your mouth shut, and your grades high" (Brown 187); in other words, I learned to keep quiet about that part of my story so I could act like the "normal," or expected, student in that class. Classes like these have caused me to question if a class is something to be survived or a place to thrive in. During classroom experiences like that, there is a sense that the teacher believes their student is avoiding the assignment, rather than looking for a way to access it.

In college, however, I took courses covering human rights literature and theater. My professor, who I'd taken previously and had for both classes, opened them with warnings about the materials we would discuss and an offer to help us find a different class if needed. During the course, they warned us when difficult moments would occur in the texts and consistently mentioned having an open door if we needed to discuss the material with them. Though I knew I could back out of assignments that related to my experiences, I read every text. Only once did I ask for an alternate assignment to write about a previous reading when the options I had for that week all hit a little too close to home. Throughout the class, I had options for how I engaged with the material and knew that I could talk to my professor and be taken seriously if I needed to. I was late with a decent amount of the work, but I still did it all. Much like with Truman and Abida, there was an open line of communication I used more often than I typically would in other courses. Because of the way they approached this class and my previous experience with

[6] Similar to the Socratic Seminar format shown by Brian West and the EHHSVikingChannel on YouTube.

them, there was a sense that my professor knew I was trying to do the work. They seemed to understand that what might have looked like a lack of engagement on the assessment side of things was genuinely a struggle to find words for my relationship to and understanding of the material.

Teaching With Gentleness

The idea of teaching with gentleness comes from the idea of "care" or "care work" within the classroom. It avoids the term "care" due to its associations with "care taking" and the intense labor implied by it, including the sense that the teacher is in a position to help their students through their struggles, rather than a position that simply allows space for their stories. While my goal is to create spaces that care for stories as a way to care for students, I insist against taking on a caretaker role. Instead, I ask that educators respect the stories students carry with them and use the way we care for stories as a model for the way we approach those that carry stories of trauma. There is a labor of accommodation associated with this kind of teaching, but the aim is to share that labor between the teacher and student in order to "respect their agency and independence" and give the student a sense of control over their stories (Breneman et al. 350).

There is no such thing as a perfect classroom. There will always be moments teachers and students aren't prepared for; Judith Dorney states: a "central part of the work of connection is in dealing with the crises that emerge as we move forward," and traditional schooling "is not currently designed to hold these kinds of intense connections or to challenge the traditions and conventional power relations" (as qtd. in Gilligan 72). In order to design a classroom that allows for connection, particularly as we seek to discuss difficult subjects, it is necessary to normalize talking about and feeling discomfort. Citing bell hooks and Paulo Freíre as her guides, Brown emphasizes the need for discomfort to achieve transformative education; she begins her classes

with a statement—a content warning—that “If you’re comfortable, I’m not teaching and you’re not learning,” telling her readers that the “simple and honest process of letting people know that discomfort is normal… why it happens, and why it’s important, reduces anxiety, fear, and shame” (199). This, along with ongoing conversations that approach discomfort and keep it from becoming an elephant in the room, normalize discomfort in learning and allows space for students to experience their growing pains in an environment they know they are welcome in.

In the difference between rigor and access, the core question is: what amount of discomfort allows for growth and strength, and what amount of discomfort becomes an unnecessary struggle? Where is the line between eustress and distress? Mingus’s idea of access intimacy may be part of the answer because it is “something that can transform ordinary access into a tool for liberation” (“Access Intimacy”). This sense of safety is how I see the embodiment of a gentle teacher, a sense that they take their students' access needs seriously and make space for these needs in the classroom environment they’ve created. They don’t need to be perfect, all they need to do is show they’re trying and are open to changing the plan.

Conclusion

While this discussion remains open, this work seeks to carve a space for the idea of gentleness and its potential uses in classrooms discussing difficult topics. There are a lot of unspoken risks in the humanities classroom in that our most important and meaningful ideas often come from the most vulnerable aspects of our histories. Literature aims to articulate pieces of the human experience that often come with as much or more pain than there is happiness, and storytellers with trauma may be a key to learning how to care for these stories as audience members, community members, and scholars. A classroom is part of a campus village, and the focus of the stories we tell, our students’ initiation into topics, becomes the moral of the story.

As always, there are researchable gaps that lie outside of the scope of this text. Future researchers can better define “rigorous” in these contexts and better find ways to measure learning goals, as some have done using methods like “ungrading.” Researchers could also follow this text with clarification on ways gentleness can be expressed in the classroom, its limits, and explore other approaches that can be beneficial in these settings for those that don’t feel a gentle approach is authentic to them.

Through this text, I have tried to articulate how the “origin myths” of storytellers with trauma impact the way we see ourselves and others. My hope has been to find a way to fit myself in the classroom and still teach about important topics. Through this writing I attempt to fill a gap in research about the discussion of difficult texts in the classroom when the content can become difficult—even triggering—to students from my perspective as a student with trauma who aims to teach. This text also introduces the idea of teaching with gentleness in order to make and hold space for students that have trauma, particularly when it impacts their schoolwork. It is closely related to the idea of “care” in the classroom, however it avoids association with the word due to the additional labor considerations it may imply. While accommodating students may be labor, this work does not intend to ask teachers to take on the student’s problems or work alone in their efforts. This work aims to ask teaching professionals to consider the teamwork inherent in teaching and learning and how they might share classroom power more ethically when difficult course content, while valuable, can become hazardous to those who carry trauma.

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Appendix A
Father's Day
CW: homophobic slur

My father's a carpenter.
His hands, calloused and strong,
have passed over every inch of my childhood home.

All he's ever wanted to do was shelter me.
All he's ever wanted to do was keep me safe.
He's said he never thought he'd be a Father.

All I wanted was to be like him.
All I wanted was to be loved by him.
That hand I reach for in haunted houses.

As a kid, I was his shadow,
snapping at his heels every step of the way.
His hobbies were mine, I helped with every fix.

I know he loves me, wants to protect me.
I don't think he knows how.
I don't think he knows a better way.

He's always told us to do everything right:
"Do as I say, not as I do."
As if it were that easy.

He's always tried to teach me:
"Men lie, don't believe a word we say."
He said he was the proof.

He told me: "You look like a bull-dyke. You'll never get a job!"
He asked me: "You know I'd *kill* the man who hurt you?"
He said: "You're the only one who showed up."

The others got him a card; signed my name on it,
but they were busy, so I was the only one.
It's not like Mother's Day: we always show up for that.

Appendix B
Transcript Poem: Gentleman

He didn't *care* that we weren't boys.
He was perfectly fine with having two girls.

You know, some men: “I want a son.”
    But my father wasn't like that. At all.

He was like: “Screw it.”
    He didn’t care whether it was a girl or boy.

He always encouraged us to do well in school.
                                He always wanted us to get A’s.

He'd always look at our report card when we got it.
If we got, you know, a B on something, he’d say:
        “Now couldn’t you work just a little bit harder
                                to get an A?”

But, as a parent,
    I think I got possibly one spanking in my entire life.
But he did not, he was not a physically, you know, violent person at all.
    Very gentle. I'd call him a gentle man.
                                A gentleman.

I remember Daddy, now I was just a little kid,
    like five, maybe six, something like that,
        and I did something bad. I can't even remember what I did,
                                but Daddy called me and I ran.

I thought:
    “He'll never be able to catch me.”
    Boy, he caught me in a hurry and he whomped me on the bottom.

Appendix C
Transcript Poem: Women's Work

Being a housewife and mother in those days,
it was definitely more of a job then, as far as hours of labor;
you didn't even have *dishwashers* or *anything* like that.

The women…
it was just an incredible amount of work.
The women did everything:
They made soap and
tapped the maple trees for syrup.
They washed clothes, sheets, and towels
with no washing machine.

They had two tubs:
one for washing, and one for rinsing, then
run the clothes through the wringer
to get the water of of them,
and hang them on the line.

They had to have food for the wintertime;
it was great in the summertime when
you could just go out to the garden and pick it,
but in the winter, you had to have it canned.

… the canning!
it was just
an incredible amount of work.

I'm much more outspoken,
I have a much more
dominant personality than Louise.
She was very gentle,
a very *gentle* personality.
Not meek or anything like that,
She did a great job,
She was just *quieter* and
outspoken

She was four years older than Mac.
She really thought that women got a bad break.
She spent her childhood,
as she said:
"Waiting on her brothers,"
Doing the cooking, the washing, the sewing.
She just…

My mother was
one of the few working mothers around.
She became a teacher.
She started teaching when
I was about ten.
My sister was about eight, so
we were both going to school full time.

My mother had two years
of college
when she started teaching.
In order to increase her salary,
she finished up her bachelors.

She was doing three things:
She was a full-time housewife and mother,
She was a college student, and
She was teaching.

She continued teaching until she retired.
She was a wonderful teacher,
a first grade teacher.

she was also a mathematics teacher.
she was a good mathematics teacher.
not as
as I am as I was and am.

She was thirteen years older than I was.
She was almost like another generation there.