

# ON MY DISCIPLINARY IDENTITY

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Even though I had a deep conviction that I was good at writing, and that in some way I already *was* a writer, this conviction was completely independent of my having ever written anything, or being able to imagine ever writing anything, that I thought anyone would like to read. Elif Batuman, *The Idiot*

Inevitably, all great writers get asked the age-old questions: When did they know they wanted to devote their lives to writing? Did they always know they were destined to write? Had they seen signs in their early life of being a great writer? Sometimes, when I'm cosplaying this identity of a 'great writer' being interviewed by an 'important magazine,' I pretend to think thoughtfully before answering with my most humble yet grandiose answer.

Yet, these questions confound me even now. Growing up, writing was not a practice or philosophy that I picked apart to try and find a hidden meaning in. Usually, it was nothing more than a piece of paper in my satin blue diary for me to ask myself things like *why did that boy at school not talk to me today, why are my parents fighting all the time, why do we have that hole in our door where the doorknob should be*. I wasn't exactly hoping to find answers to these questions, but they were an early way for me to materialize what had felt wholly abstract. Since then, it must have been that: using language to materialize the everyday; making sense of what, otherwise, does not; and hoping that it can take me a little closer to what feels unreachable. It must have been.

It turns out that educational institutions are not typically in the business of fostering this thing I call 'materializing language' — especially not when the so-called 'institution' is a victim of what we call the 'New York City Department of Education Budget

‘Allocation.’ Who cares about this thing we call ‘fostering students in the act of materializing language’ when the so-called victimized institution’ is being forced to choose between new metal detectors or new books for the English Department (ones that don’t have slurs or sexually-epithetic drawings in them)? There is no difficult decision to make, and there is no real choice to begin with.

I remember watching white private school girls in the American television shows I loved so much as a high school student, wondering why I was not also decked out in expensive plaid, analyzing in English class why Anna Karenina threw herself under a train, or why Jane Austen began her seminal novel with that famous, seminal first line, or why Beat poetry should be distinguished from other, traditional forms of poetry. In other words, there was a canon, and I had not familiarized myself with it before arriving at the hallowed steps of higher education. Who was to blame for my missed literary prowess; for the missed opportunity in forming my own literary identity – the one that the ‘great writer’ typically references in an ‘interview with important magazine’?

The answer may very well have been me, at the very moment I was denied admittance to one of the nine elite institutions in New York’s specialized high school system. My mother, who had truly believed that my education was over at the time, was not interested in the politics of how unequal the distribution of funding, resources, or opportunity was for public high schools in our state. She was not interested in how unfair it was that three of the specialized high schools – which already boasted massive multi-million dollar endowments, and just happened to be regular feeder schools to some of the most wealthy and prestigious universities in the world – were receiving more of our public school funding,[1] while the zoned school I would end up attending was still suffering from underfunded resources,

underpaid faculty, and underinvested youth. She was not interested in the normative statement of what should be, for the empirical fact was simply that it was. And if this is the way things empirically *were*, why had I let her sacrifice go to waste? Getting rejected after being enrolled and entrenched in an American hagwon was simply unheard of. These private enrichment schools, ubiquitous in Korean communities around the world[2], espoused meritocracy and reminded students constantly about the sacrifices their families made so they could study comfortably. Sacrifice was not to be wasted.

Before entering high school, our Korean mothers would flock to the various *hagwons* in Queens, New York, and enroll us in a preparatory course to ensure that we, the children, would not forget that they were spending their blood money, made from washing white women's feet at the nail salon or from standing twelve hours a day at the supermarket register. All this to send us to the best high schools in the city so that they could eventually send us to the best colleges in the country. Were we lucky to have someone making these sacrifices for us? How can we redeem ourselves? And to whom do we owe this debt? At the time, I thought this was an Asian thing, where we could quickly point fingers at our mothers for leading us into traps of disciplinary oppression. In doing so, we failed to realize that for our parents and our communities, sacrifice not only had to be worth the act, but was also our language of love. We failed to realize, as I do now, that when our parents — perpetual aliens, situated in the very state we nurture our own lives in — claim that sacrifice and love are inseparable, it is because what we call 'Western Capitalism' has deemed that what they call 'the non-Western Subject' must do so.

Questions of disciplinary identity did not end upon my matriculation into Northeastern, nor were they questions suddenly safe from the structures that had always permeated my young student life.

At eighteen years old, I was already contemplating the normative statement of what I should be doing in my twenties and thirties. In the months preceding my move to Boston, I decided to clock out early from my last semester of high school classes and spent countless hours sitting at what would become my childhood desk, scrolling through the university course catalog. In the hidden digital corners: Sociology; History; Political Science; Philosophy; Journalism; English. I was coming to the realization that maybe my college essays didn't have to be a lie. Maybe I really could use my role as a university student, as a budding writer and thinker, to tell meaningful stories and even impact this abstract thing we call 'truth.'

Then, I wondered how I was going to get a job, wondered if I would be wasting my degree, wondered if others might not be more impressed if I studied something else. I wondered about my mother's sacrifice. I ended up feeling that, either way, I was not the exception to the rule: I was a fantasist.

I spent my first semester biding my time in the university's business classes — a discipline I, today, don't even believe in, politically — trying to convince myself that if I was patient and studied hard, I might learn to appreciate the rigors and demands of this surely important field. Had Northeastern been more proud of its humanities departments, it might have given me the strength I needed to be honest with myself. To this day, I remain unsure of what this might have looked like, of what this might look like, but I know that whatever it was, it was not present.

The one exception of this rather impoverished semester had turned out to be First-Year Writing, a university-wide requirement that no one ever asked for but still had to take. The sentiment amongst all of the students held that the introductory course was useless, a waste of time, and a mere preliminary step to get to the real classes. But it turned out to be my saving grace, offering a glimpse of how much I enjoyed trying to understand the

difficult but wonderful theories and readings we took on; the capacity we had to be thinkers alongside, not beneath, our professor; the unstructured space we were given to analyze our various disciplines and our identities as students. To this day, I remember walking down Huntington Avenue in the rain to buy the cheapest watercolors and paint brushes I could find at Blick Art Supplies for an assignment in which our professor asked us to illustrate our disciplinary narratives. I sat for hours on the fourth floor of Snell Library, in front of the cold window, painting the old hole in the door of our family's first apartment, where our doorknob should have been; painting the two twin beds my mother had pushed together so that my sister and I could sleep close to each other; painting our old bookshelf, where my mother had tried to train me rigorously into becoming an avid reader.

I began to explore other writing-intensive courses, starting with the demystification of the major they called Political Science. I remember feeling self-conscious because my only reason for taking a course in this discipline was an unspoken belief that this knowledge was somehow important to obtain, while my peers had spent most of their high school careers rubbing shoulders at G20 conferences and writing essays about international conflicts. I remember feeling embarrassed that I had no idea what a G20 conference even was.

And so, I decided there was no better way to start than by understanding the very foundations of political life, city, and identity. I enrolled in the course they called Ancient Philosophy.

I no longer believe in the idea of becoming the 'great writer' asked to be interviewed by 'important magazine,' nor do I believe that a student such as myself has to be familiar with the thing we call 'canon' (who chooses the canon?) to meaningfully engage with language. This should have been clear to me from the

beginning, but the motivations provided to students for pursuing certain academic disciplines over others are often muddled by the material reality of social and economic class dynamics and aspirations; by the material reality of immigration and diaspora. We are told from a young age that if we pursue x, y, or z, we can have a better life than our parents did. Look at how much they suffered for us to have a better life here! Why would we not pursue x, y, and z?

But for all the forces that attempted to strip an alternative imagination from me, I still concluded that my discipline is largely about using language to confront the tensions that fill our days and ultimately our lives, to confront the violence of memory. Language is, and remains, a shared and cohesive act of dreaming, inventing, and reimagining.

I didn't come to this conclusion alone. When I made the final decision to switch my major to Political Science, I met with my new academic advisor, who was new to the university as well. She was youthful and kind and complimented the color of my lipstick, which helped a little, but not much given the wider context of my fear about what the change would entail (her expression seemed to ask: what will it entail?). But rather than suggesting alternative majors, or pointing me to the university's website to consider other career options, she shared a similar story of having to pay a price for studying what she loved (why must we pay a price at all?). And if my academic advisor was just one facet of external support I received in ultimately deciding on my discipline, my professors have been a powerful reminder in the classroom of what our sacrifices are worth.

Questions remain unanswered: What are the structures that dictate what we should think about and devote ourselves to? How do we make sense of the tensions that consume our identities as

students and thinkers? Who or what can we blame for repressing our most intimate feelings? Except now, I am not troubled by the fact that I have no answers yet. The very absence of such answers serves as a powerful reminder of what my tumultuous path to studying language, literature, and politics is worth. It is a labor of love.

### Works Cited

[1] Pont, Gabe, et al. "School Funding in NYC." *Money in the Schoolhouse: How New York City's Education Budget is Broken By Gabriel Pont – School Funding In NYC*, <https://raceandschools.barnard.edu/schoolfunding/gabes-op-ed/>.

[2] Luo, Michael. "What Min Jin Lee Wants Us to See." *The New Yorker*, 17 Feb. 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/what-min-jin-lee-wants-us-to-see>.