
LOVE AND DESPAIR IN TEACHING

Daniel P. Liston

School of Education

University of Colorado at Boulder

INTRODUCTION

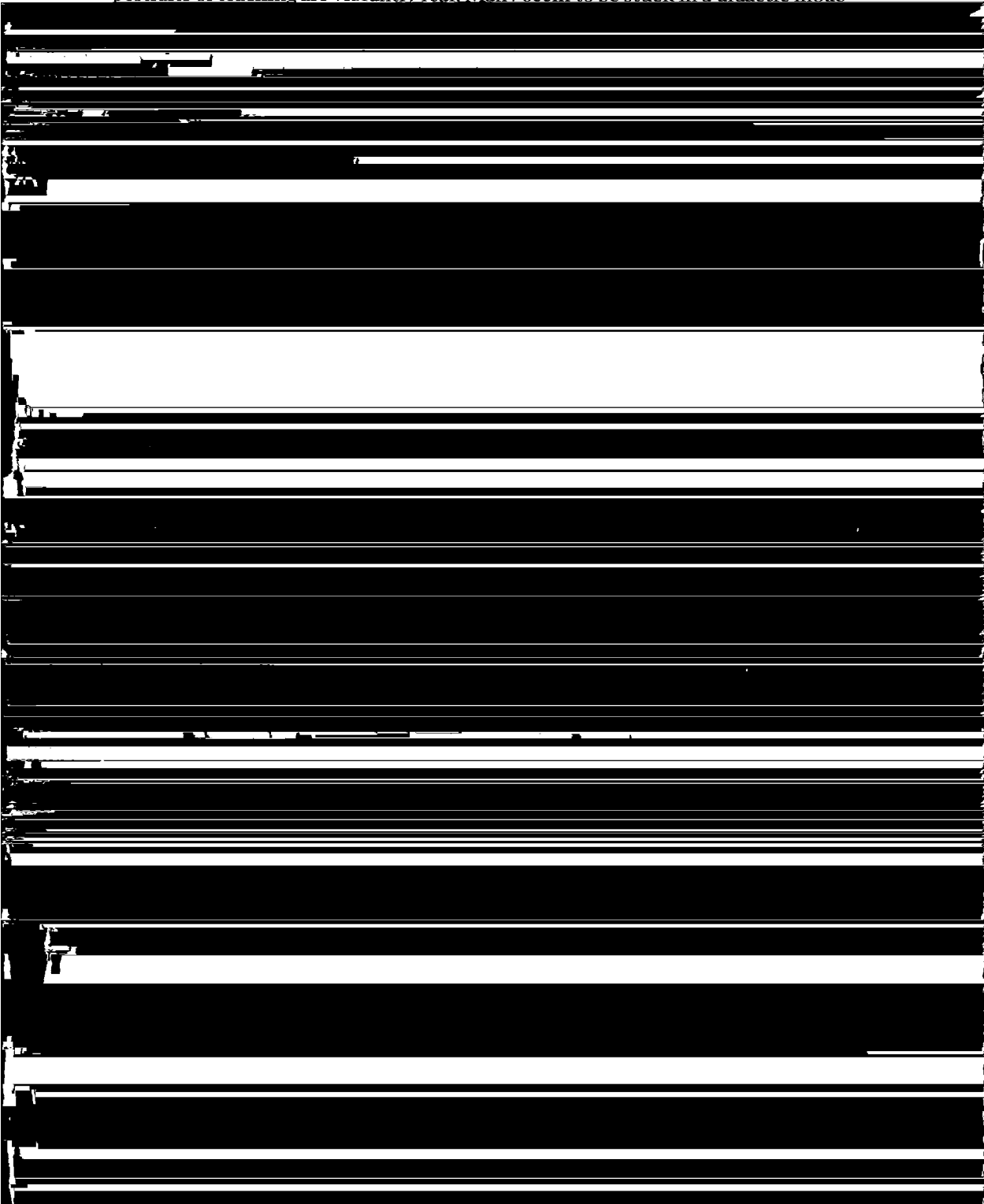
In every teacher's heart there is an unrelenting darkness. It is a darkness that



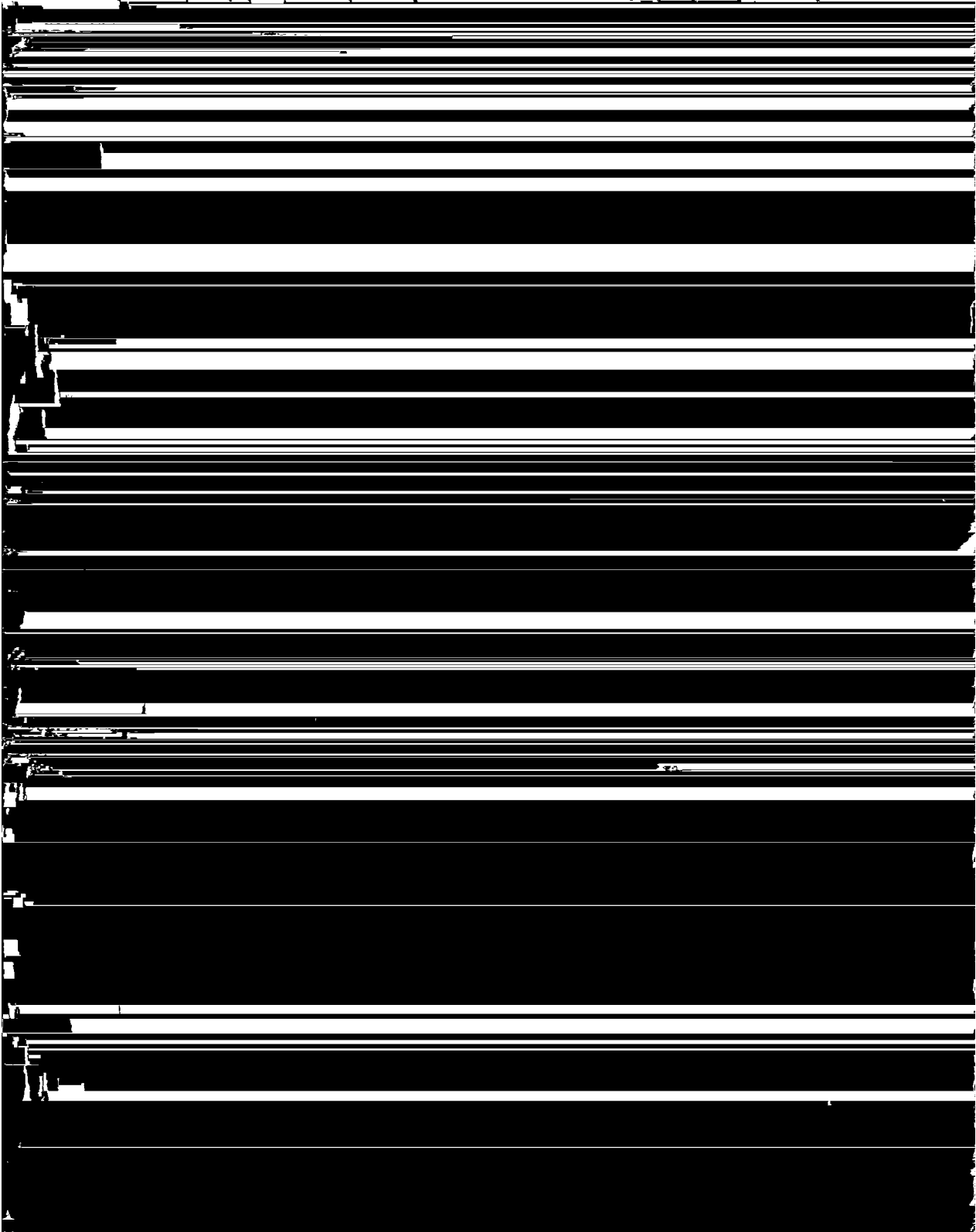
pain and depletion within the teaching ranks.³ In the critical race literature Derrick Bell, Cornel West, and bell hooks argue that "critical" racial and political

DESPAIR IN TEACHING

Through literature we sometimes come to understand those lives before and behind us. It is a body of work that offers the opportunity to examine our own lives, while we gaze upon and attempt to understand others. Unfortunately, few literary portraits of teaching are vibrantly real. Many seem to be stuck in a didactic mode —



Every so often one or two autobiographies are brighter, less dismal. But for the most part Jessica's students' sheer sadness overwhelms her. Jessica "gasps like one nearly



teaching, I might have been saved from a lot of pain" (LS, 90). A salvific desire for dispensation from pain seems to be a recurring theme in Tompkins's memoir, *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned*. A prominent literary scholar, formerly at Duke and now at the University of Illinois-Chicago, Tompkins looks back at her education and teaching, looking at what they embodied and lacked. She finds that her

her inability to deliver the intellectual goods and as a student she feared letting her love of literature show. Schools, she argues, offer students and teachers partial selves: walking minds at best, disembodied and disfigured souls at worst. For Tompkins, graduate school was the culminating experience in creating this partial self:

When I talk about graduate school, try as I may, I can't keep the bitterness from creeping into my voice. Though my idealism about literature was partly based on ignorance and snobbery and self-protectiveness, it was real nevertheless. It was an expression of love and the best thing I had to offer. At Yale I spent five years learning how to strangle my love, and I never quite got over it.... At Yale the fear of not wanting to appear stupid or ill-informed was dominant and set the tone. People were afraid to show who they really were, and most of all they were afraid to show what

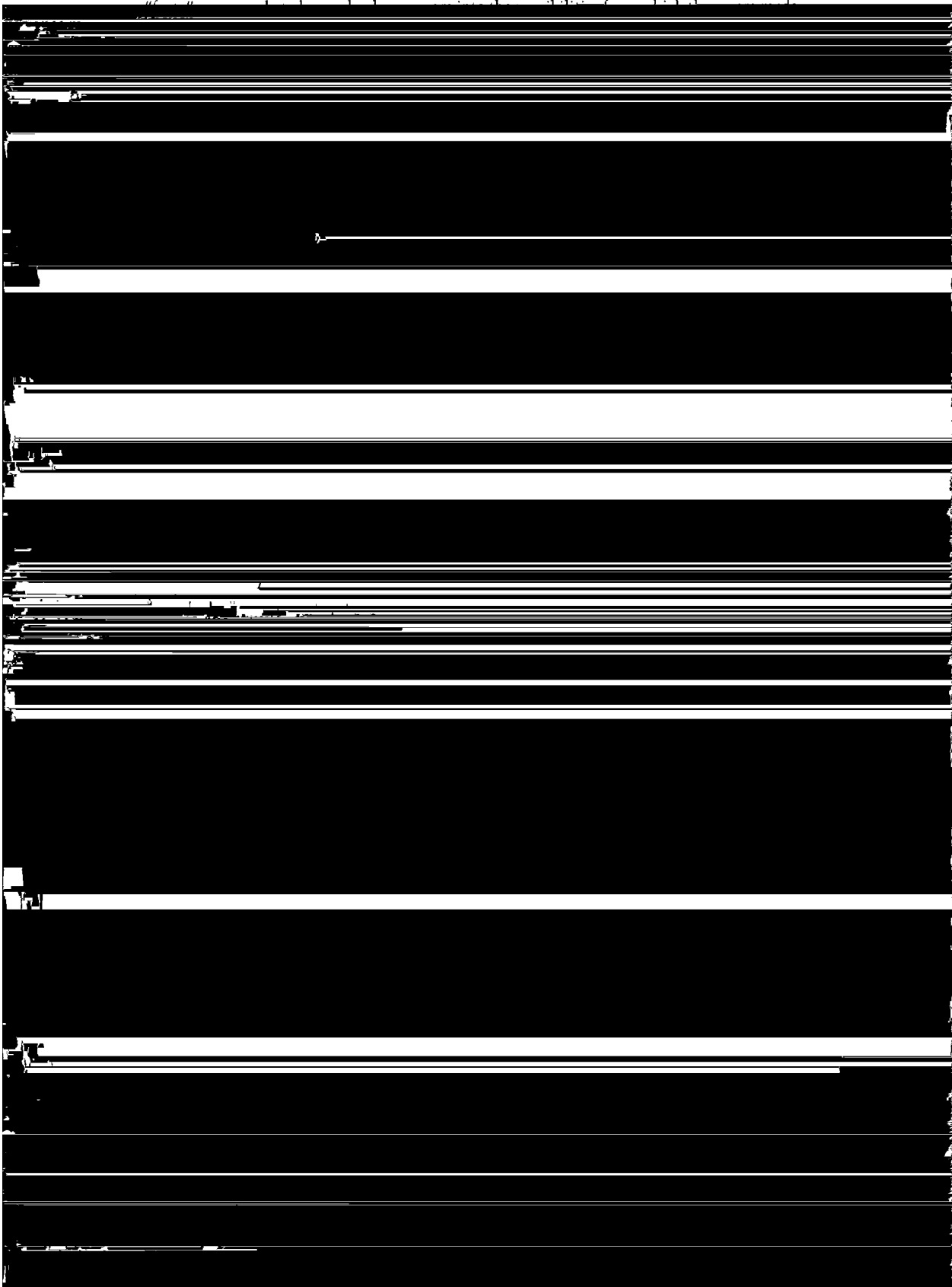
But it appears that Tompkins's education taught her to forgo her affection for literature, an affection she attempted to suppress and replace with brilliance. Of her

bringing the student and the curriculum together. In repressing her love for literature

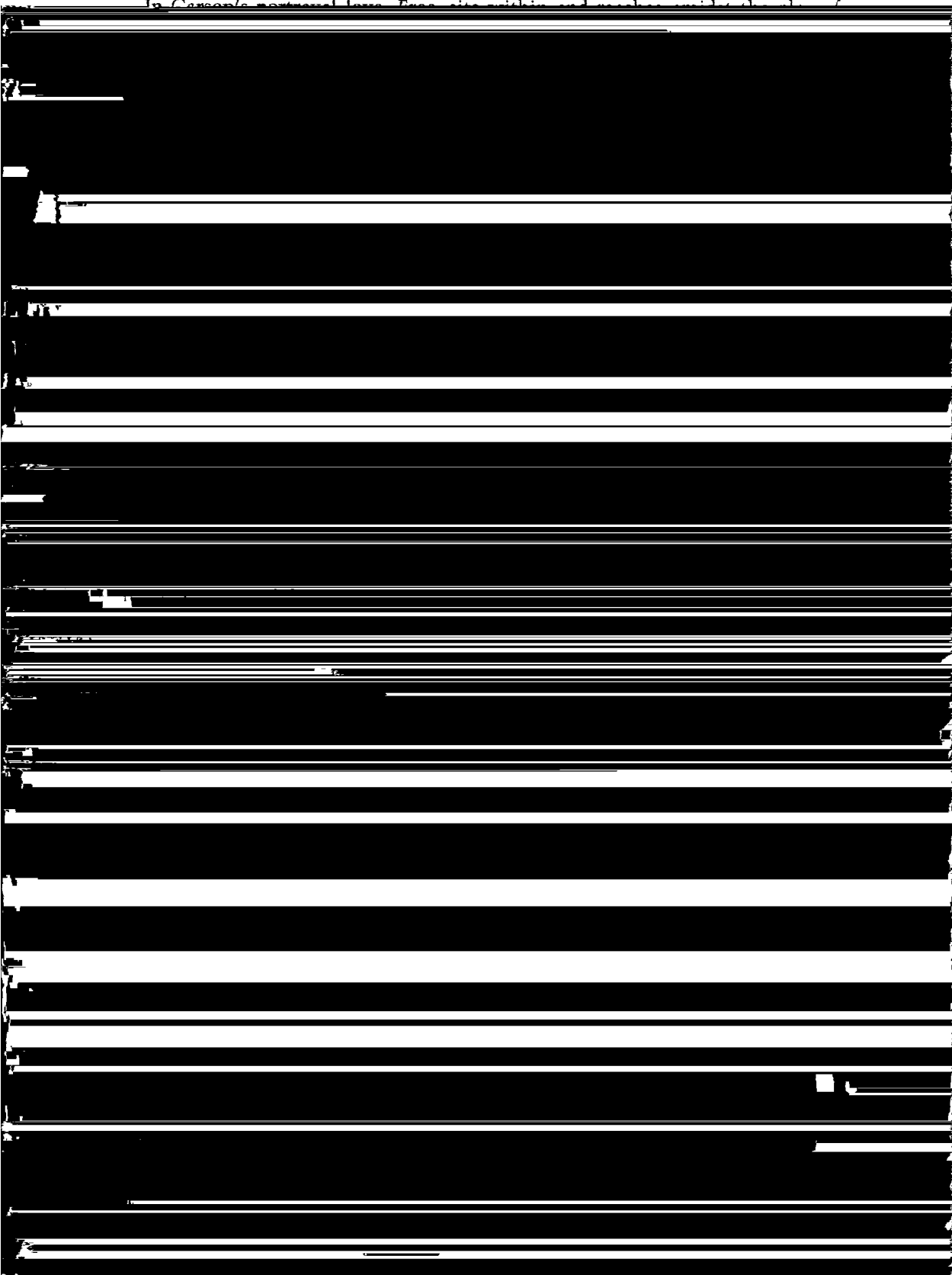
My love for the alphabet, which endures, grew out of reciting it but, before that, out of seeing the letters on the page. In my own story books, before I could read them for myself, I fell in love with various winding, enchanted-looking initials drawn by Walter Crane at the heads of fairy tales. In "Once upon a time" an "O" had a rabbit running it as a treadmill, his feet upon flowers. When the day came, years later, for me to see the Book of Kells, all the wizardry of letter, initial, and word swept over me a thousand times over, and the illumination, the gold, seemed a part of the word's beauty and holiness that had been there from the start.¹⁰

Commenting on this love of letters Anne Carson, poet and classics essayist, asks us

Think how much energy, time, and emotion goes into that effort of learning: it absorbs years of your life and dominates your self-esteem; it informs much of your subsequent endeavor to grasp and communicate with the world. Think of the beauty of letters, and of how it feels to come to

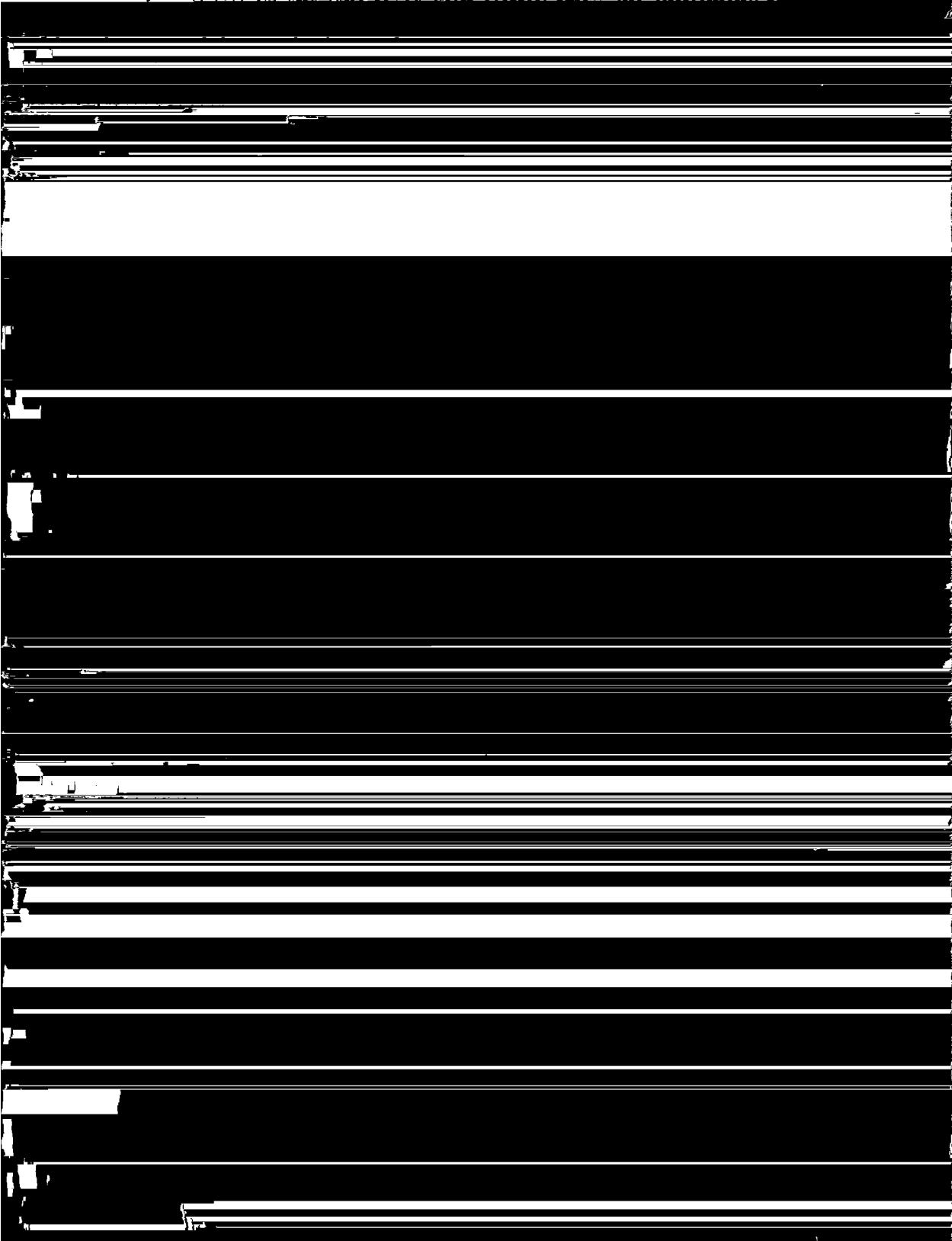


In Carson's poststructural logic, "Every site within and without and in-between" (p. 10)



ON SUFFERING AND ENLARGED LOVE

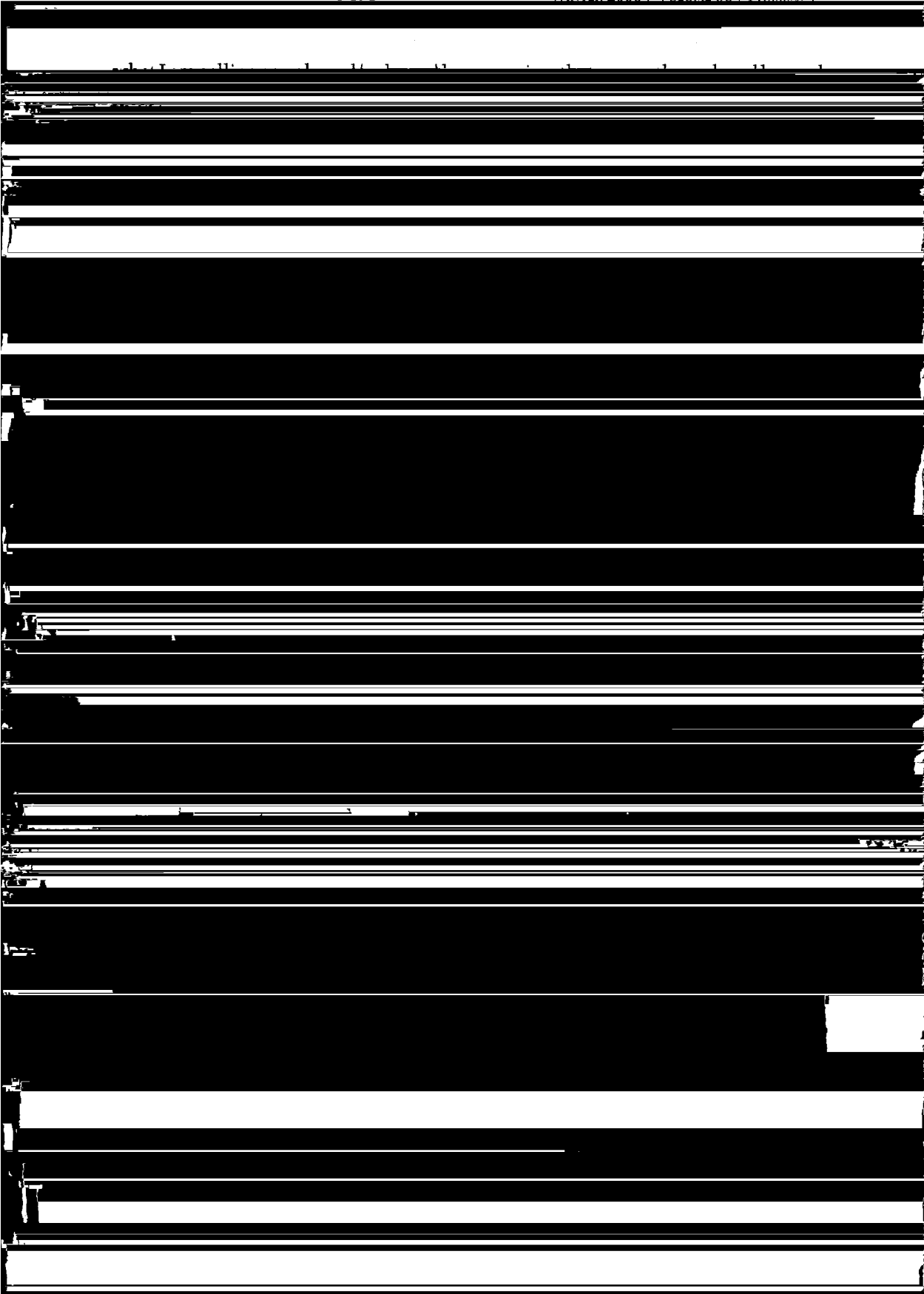
Emily, Jessica, and Jane loved their stories, knew the excitement, felt this



underscores the limitations of an analytical approach in these situations.¹⁷ Palmer offers the following admonition and suggestion:

We split paradoxes so reflexively that we do not understand the price we pay for our habit. The

on despair and love, Simone Weil's writings on love and affliction, and Iris Murdoch's attention to love, a sense of the void, and "the good" all share Palmer's concern for a larger love in suffering.²⁰ And it is in Murdoch's earlier work that we find an elaboration of this enlarged love. In this enlarged love at least three facets seem necessary: a diminished sense of self, an attentive gaze toward the situation and the



of themselves: their passions, their loves and aversions, their idiosyncrasies, and their blemishes. Their naked humanness is offered to others. Despair seems to have

Recall that Jessica stated, in teaching, "Your identity is on the line....And so if you get negativism or disinterest or hostility from the class, then that's really a blow. That's a comment on my whole being" (SV, 213). It seems that Jessica opened her entire self to her students, emptied herself in her classroom, allowed others to judge

where there is little left, and then ask for judgment is to put too much of your self on the line. In Jessica's situation the noise emanating from her self-abnegation was deafening. When that occurs, the teaching self is not diminished but decimated. In teaching with a larger love our sense of self-importance, our concerns about our brilliance, and our preoccupation with classroom presentations are diminished. But as diminished these various features of the self is not to diminish the teaching self. If we

and subject together. So what would this enhanced vision, this quality of attentiveness, mean for Emily's teaching? It might permit her to understand why so many of her students enjoyed the car's racing thrill and the exuberance of their friends' company. It might help her explore the harmony she observed between the physical education teachers and her students, their attraction to the sensual reach of bodies in motion. It might enable her to understand her students' desires and the fuel of their imaginations and to offer her sustenance for her own imagination and desire. With

to the good in others, allowing the "thou" in others to address the "I" in ourselves,

At the university, in high schools, and in middle and elementary schools, teachers

throughout literature and the contextualization of teachers' work that informs the

love and despair in teaching would necessitate addressing the following question: How can we structure teachers' work to allow for both a love of learning and enlarged love in teaching? Teachers' work would, I believe, look radically different if this

question were addressed and teachers' work restructured. The love and despair thesis also provides a potential ethic and basis for teacher protest toward school reform. If good teaching entails an expression of one's love of learning and requires an enlarged love toward our students, and if school structures and community misunderstandings obstruct an adequate teaching practice, we may have additional ethical and rhetorical bases for reform. It may be a basis that connects emotionally and more