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Open WORDS

*Access
and
English
Studies*

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Editor's Introduction

Open Access and the Working Class

WHEN JOHN TASSONI AND I FIRST ENVISIONED *OPEN WORDS*, WE REALIZED THAT OUR interests would overlap considerably with working-class studies. “Open access,” “at-risk,” “first-generation,” even “non-mainstream”—all of these coded terms for students at various times imply or have implied “working class” at some level. Thomas Mortenson’s study of access to universities uncovers that the annual income of the family best predicts the ability or inability of any individual student to graduate. Mortenson’s data reveal that students from families earning less than \$25,000 were ten to twelve times less likely to earn a degree by the age of twenty-four than students whose family earned \$75,000 or more (42-23). Working-class students are at-risk. They are outside the mainstream of standard perceptions of college. They need access to higher education. However, class is still, as Michael Parenti worded it years ago, “a dirty little secret in America” (55), and our field has traditionally hesitated to talk about it too openly.

The uneasiness associated with frank discussions of class should not shock us too much. English studies has been complicit with elitism. Literature programs historically have acted to preserve what the canon has deemed “culture.” Recent attempts to add or subtract from the canon have not eliminated from the discipline a sense of aesthetic quality that can be best appreciated by those with refined tastes. Certainly writing courses, if not necessarily the scholarly discipline of composition, have promoted standard written English as the dialect of prestige, despite the field’s recognition of the logical, grammatical structures of dialects spoken by marginalized groups. Many creative writing programs still guide their students toward writing for literary magazines at the expense of popular genres more likely to be read by the working class. Sharon O’Dair’s discussion of the university’s function of embourgeoisement and her apparent willingness to champion this cause is just one example of our field’s continuing and explicit recognition of its role in protecting middle- and upper-class interests (602-04).

Yet inroads have been made. Among others works, Barney Dews and Carolyn Law’s book, *This Fine Place So Far From Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class*, made the field aware of the multiple class backgrounds of academics. Sherry Lee Linkon’s edited collection, *Teaching Working Class*, gathered together scholars to talk both about teaching working-class students and developing curriculum that exposes the class system. Members of our editorial board also have been prominent in bringing class to the attention of compositionists.

Mike Rose's working-class memoir, *Lives on the Boundary*, opened the door for academics to talk about their own class origins and to see connections to our students' class affiliations and their performance in our classrooms. Ira Shor started the Working-Class Culture and Pedagogy special interest group of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, welcoming writing instructors to talk about the conflicts they felt as working-class academics and theorizing the role class plays in our pedagogies. Julie Lindquist studied the rhetoric of a working-class bar in *A Place to Stand*, documenting specific argumentative strategies employed by the bar's patrons. William DeGenaro analyzed the place of class in his hard look at the function of junior colleges in "Class Consciousness and the Junior College Movement: Creating a Docile Workforce." The list could go on. Suffice it to say that composition studies' connection to working-class issues is starting to emerge from the shadows, and the members of our board have contributed much scholarship in this burgeoning area.

This issue of *Open Words* focuses on the working-class element within open admission and non-traditional students. Our contributors explore four distinct manifestations of working-class consciousness in the field. Wendy Ryden directly addresses the elitism found within the aesthetics of the profession. "Bourgeois Realism or Working-Class Kitsch?: The Aesthetics of Class in Composition" critiques academia's favoring of melancholic kitsch over nostalgic kitsch. She suggests that not much difference marks the two except for middle-class values, and she indicates ways nostalgia and melancholy conflict within teachers' perceptions of student writing as much as they do within the writing itself. In "Deep Shit: A Dialogue about Rhetoric, Pedagogy, and the Working Class," my co-editor John collaborates with two of his former graduate students—Richard Lee Walts and Sara Webb-Sunderhaus—in a piece that demonstrates ways in which our working-class students' troubled lives impact our teaching. The three of them realize that in trying to deal with the particular plight of individual students, we often overlook the systemic—or, to use their vernacular, the shit—that makes our efforts at "rescuing" students suspect. Jane Falk, in pedagogically confronting the essence of social class, looks at the pragmatics of encouraging a largely working-class population to explore the topical theme of work. "Shaped by Resistance: Work as a Topical Theme for the Composition Classroom" shows Falk's persistence in finding a way for students to engage their experiences with work critically and to create conditions for success. Finally, Lynn Z. Bloom's "The Ineluctable Elitism of Essays and Why They Prevail in First-Year Composition Courses" pursues her interest in understanding composition as a middle-class enterprise. Bloom uncovers the class biases in the essay genre and suggests, especially in first-year composition courses, that this bias will not be overcome any time soon.

John and I hope that contributors to future issues of *Open Words* can further the dialogue begun here. We cannot really understand the issues surrounding open access programs

until we grasp the inherent class biases in our discipline. Open admissions and working-class studies are linked; they further intersect with the field's interests in race, disability, gender, sexuality, and region. We trust that *Open Words* can be a forum for explorations of these intersections.

William H. Thelin

October, 2006

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Wendy Ryden

Bourgeois Realism or Working Class Kitsch?: The Aesthetics of Class in Composition

TO SAY THAT WRITING INSTRUCTION HAS FOCUSED IN LARGE PART ON THE DEVELOPMENT of the writing agent is perhaps to state the obvious. But it is precisely this connection that William Irmscher highlights in his 1979 assertion that writing is “a process of growing and maturing . . . a way of promoting the higher intellectual development of the individual” (241-42). Nearly a decade later, Robert Brooke reiterates, with the benefit of hindsight, “The entire ‘process, not product’ revolution can be seen as a change of focus from results to behaviors, from texts to people—in its best forms, the goal is to teach people to be writers, not to produce good texts in the course of a semester” (38). We might conclude that composition, even in current-traditional mode, has been concerned not merely with the composing of texts but the composing of lives—and thus the ethics of that composition. Indeed the molding of subjectivity has been at the core of composition’s process movement. As Lester Faigley maintains, historically in the United States “writing teachers were as much or more interested in *whom* they want their students to be as in *what* they want their students to write” (113 emphasis his).

That class is a component of this focus on subjectivity is evident in Lynn Bloom’s claim that freshman composition is a “middle-class enterprise,” a vehicle for inculcating the characteristics of industry, reasonableness, and earnest politeness. Bloom’s analysis makes explicit what others have hinted at in their discussions of the “bold moral and civic claims” made in the name of writing instruction (Newkirk 70). When Ken Bruffee tells us, for example, “mature, effective interdependence—social maturity integrated with intellectual maturity—is the most important lesson we should expect students to learn” (xiii), he expresses views congenial to Bloom’s notions of middle-class responsibility.

But this mission of middle-class subjectivity does not go unchallenged. In his discussion of Coles’s and Vopat’s collection of best student writing, Lester Faigley implicitly critiques the assumed middle-class aesthetic that governs our reception of student texts. Faigley singles out one student’s reflectively lyrical essay about writing letters home from Paris, an

essay that is praised by the instructor for its honesty and courage, to comment that “From Vivaldi at Notre Dame to the value of writing, the truths ‘exposed’ and ‘revealed’ in the essay are a series of recognitions for a college English teacher” (125). Put another way, the essay conforms to middle-class “teachers’ unstated assumptions about subjectivity” (128), which Faigley sees revealed in instructors’ responses to student writing:

The teachers’ commentaries on the narratives of past experience imply that success in teaching depends on making a student aware of the desired subject position she will occupy . . . It is this notion of the student writer as a developing rational consciousness that makes most talk of empowerment so confused . . . what is very little explored in the teachers’ commentaries on the narratives is the institutional setting of student writing about the self and how that setting is implicated in the production of “honest” and “truthful” writing. (129)

In his examination of what constitutes the honest and truthful in student writing, Faigley is implicitly calling for a class-based interrogation of our enlightenment/romantic conceptions of authorship as well as a reevaluation of what are ultimately the *aesthetic* judgments that we make about student texts. I emphasize aesthetic because in our turn toward the rhetorical in writing studies, discussions of aesthetic concerns may seem insufficiently critical or anachronistically belletristic. My contention is that a consideration of aesthetics, specifically theories of kitsch, can help us understand the rhetoric of student texts (and our reactions to them) as products of a conflicted academic terrain, one that we as institutional players must all negotiate. In particular, this negotiation takes place around the questions of subjectivity and development that figure so prominently in the praxis of writing instruction. It is this interest in the developing subjectivity of the student writer—not just an interest in texts but in lives—that has cultivated what I consider an aesthetic of kitsch.

Kitsch: Not Just Knickknacks

Kitsch is a slippery aesthetic category, but most typically, it is defined as bad or fake art that lacks a critical dimension. According to Dorfles, it is:

a problem of individuals who believe that art should produce pleasant, sugary feelings; or even that art should form a kind of “condiment,” a kind of background music, a decoration, a status symbol even, as a way of shining in one’s social circle; in no case should it [art] be a serious matter, a tiring exercise, an involved and critical activity. (15-16)

With the exception of Tomas Kulka, who attempts a definition based on formalist principles, most theorists see the aesthetic deficiency of kitsch, its “badness,” as an ethical and political failure linked to conditions of modernity and reproduction, loss of authenticity and individ-

uality. Hermann Broch paired kitsch and romanticism, seeing in them a common impulse of obfuscating sentimentality: “The kitsch system requires its followers to ‘work beautifully,’ while the art system issues the ethical order: ‘Work well.’ Kitsch is the element of evil in the value system of art” (63). Milan Kundera also locates the beginnings of kitsch in the “sentimental” nineteenth century as the metaphysical “absolute denial of shit, in both literal and figurative senses of the word” (*Lightness* 248). Kundera presents kitsch as a politicized aesthetic, linking it to totalitarian regimes and the elimination of dissent through perpetuation of the idyll:

People have always aspired to an idyll, a garden where nightingales sing, a realm of harmony where the world does not rise up as a stranger against man nor man against other men, where the world and all its people are molded from a single stock and the fire lighting up the heavens is the fire burning in the hearts of men, where every man is a note in a magnificent Bach fugue and anyone who refuses his note is a mere black dot, useless and meaningless, easily caught and squashed between the fingers like an insect. (*Laughter and Forgetting* 8)

The connection between totalitarianism and kitsch was established by the Nazis themselves in their “decadent” art exhibit, which banned work at odds with the “beautiful” ideal of fascism. Clement Greenberg’s 1939 essay “The Avant Garde and Kitsch” obliquely attempts to situate the appeal of kitsch within a context of rising fascism and heroic art. Recently, Catherine Lugg has stressed kitsch as a system of manipulation, defining it as the avoidance of “complex, painful realities” (106) in favor of “syrupy emotionalism” that “shape(s) the direction of the political environment” (119). Kitsch, then, far from being merely a harmless obsession with tacky knickknacks, is often understood as a dangerous phenomenon steeped in mass appeal.

Kitsch and Class

This connection between kitsch and the masses implies a class-based understanding of the aesthetic. Greenberg is explicit on this point:

There has always been on one side the minority of the powerful and therefore the cultivated and on the other the great mass of the exploited and poor and therefore the ignorant. Formal culture has always belonged to the first, while the last have had to content themselves with folk or rudimentary culture, or kitsch. (16)

Greenberg’s rhetoric here of an exploited, impoverished, ignorant “great mass” connects kitsch unmistakably to the working class. In so doing, he offers a materialist analysis of the low/high brow distinction, yet even as he establishes it, he, perhaps inadvertently, problematizes it:

the peasant soon finds that the necessity of working hard all day for his living and the rude, uncomfortable circumstances in which he lives do not allow him enough leisure, energy and comfort to train for the enjoyment of Picasso. This needs, after all, a considerable amount of “conditioning.”

Superior culture is one of the most artificial of all human creations, and the peasant finds no “natural” urgency within himself that will drive him towards Picasso in spite of all difficulties. In the end the peasant will go back to kitsch when he feels like looking at pictures, for he can enjoy kitsch without effort. (18)

While Greenberg’s emphasis on the “easy” aspect of kitsch is consistent with most definitions, his naturalizing of the phenomenon is unusual, as it is kitsch that is most often identified with the artificial and inauthentic. Instead Greenberg cites artificiality as the cultural achievement of the avant garde and the leisured classes (although elsewhere he does express the “genuineness” of high culture in contrast to the ersatz quality of urban mass culture, thus too connecting kitsch with “false art”). Nonetheless his recognition of the constructed nature of “superior culture” is an important one, precisely because it complicates the romantic elision of “real” art (high brow) with truth. But his failure to extend the same analysis to kitsch and the “peasant” ends in an undertheorization of the aesthetic’s class dimension.

Is kitsch indeed the aesthetic of the working class, as Greenberg’s analysis suggests? While this may square with most common conceptions, Aleksa Celebonovict moves in a different direction in her coinage of the uniquely non-pejorative term “bourgeois realism” to mark kitsch as the province of the middle class: “In the Bourgeois Realist period, art . . . tended to support a certain way of life which was subject to the moral code of the middle classes . . . artistic works bore witness to the excellence of middle-class morality” (25). Her analysis is concerned with the sentimental depictions of nineteenth-century academic painters (often designated as exemplifying kitsch) whose legacy was overtaken and ultimately discredited by the trajectory of modern art. Of such work, Celebonovict states:

The subjects treated by . . . [these] painters, no less than the style of their works, show quite unambiguously that their art was completely bound up with the preoccupations of one or more clearly defined social groups. In the course of their daily life, these groups made such a flagrant display of their conception of the world that their moral values became in a very real way the hallmark of the painting they supported. The direction and importance of this painting was therefore closely linked to its social role; and it is not difficult to understand why it was so highly appreciated by the people of the time, for it provided them with a clearly recognizable picture of themselves. (13)

This “recognizable picture” is a flattering one and linked to kitsch as I have been discussing

it. The Bourgeois Realist movement “set out . . . to interpret visible and palpable reality, with the firm intention of adapting it to the ideal image conditioning public and private life” (Celebonovict 46). Many of the works in question are sentimental depictions of family life, exotic orientalist themes, or clichéd mythological narratives. Their treatment is skillfully realistic at the same time that it is conditioned by a desire to render such realism in accordance with middle-class ideology. Bourgeois Realism, as Celebonovict describes it, is a conservative attempt to deny that which is inconsistent with the middle-class ideal.

The confusion over whether kitsch belongs to the working or middle classes derives in part from the contradictory connotations of the word “bourgeois” as well as the slipperiness

“a conservative attempt to deny that which is inconsistent with the middle-class ideal.”

of the terms “middle class” and “working class” as cultural rather than exclusively economic categories. The contradictions are relevant to a discussion of elite versus non-elite aesthetics, or the question of “taste.” What lifestyle characteristics do we associate with middle- and working-class ontologies respectively that would connect them to particular aesthetic valuations?

Immanuel Wallerstein, in his consideration of the evolving concepts of the bourgeoisie and the middle classes, points out that the bourgeois lifestyle has been associated with leisured, “aristocratic” tastes. In speaking of the twentieth century “new middle classes,” Wallerstein says that “their often quite hedonistic style of life de-emphasized the puritanical strain associated with bourgeois culture; to that extent they were ‘aristocratic’” (96-97). Yet at the same time the middle classes are connected to “a certain absence of true luxury and a certain awkwardness of social behavior” (92). The latter associations suggest that the industrious bourgeois is as susceptible to the “easy” appeal of kitsch as Greenberg’s tired “peasant” and as potentially unable to appreciate the “artificiality” of the Picasso:

when urban life became richer and more complex, the style of life of a bourgeois could also be set against that of an artist or an intellectual, representing order, social convention, sobriety and dullness in contrast to all that was seen as spontaneous, freer, gayer, more intelligent. (Wallerstein 92)

Celebonovict’s idea that kitsch upholds middle-class values in a mirror-like fashion resonates with Faigley’s criticisms of expressivism, where the rendering of middle class subjectivity in an essay typically involves “characterizing former selves as objects for analysis” (129). The often wistful tone of the personal essay is indicative of a particular aspect of the kitsch aesthetic and its connection to loss. In order to understand this relationship and its applicability

ty to the writing classroom, I rely on Celeste Olalquiaga, whose study of kitsch as a nineteenth-century development relies on Benjamin's understanding of commodity fetishism and the relationship among authenticity, reproduction, collection, and voyeurism. Olalquiaga's kitsch "is these scattered fragments of the aura, traces of dream images turned loose from their matrix, multiplied by the incessant beat of industrialization, covering the emptiness left by both the aura's demise and modernity's failure to deliver its promise of a radiant future" (84). Like Kundera, she invokes the idyll and argues that there

reigns an illusion of completeness, a universe devoid of past and future, a moment whose sheer intensity is to a large degree predicated on its very inexistence. This desperately sought moment . . . taints all waking experience with a deep-felt longing, as if one lived but to encounter once again this primal, archaic pleasure of total connection. (28-29)

What is of particular interest to me for the purposes of understanding the aesthetics of the writing classroom is Olalquiaga's discussion of the idea of the souvenir, in which she problematizes the concept of the idyll. Here Olalquiaga makes a distinction between two kinds of kitsch: melancholic and nostalgic. This echoes Broch, who hints at two types of kitsch, declaring that Hitler "liked the full-bodied type of kitsch and the saccharine type" and that "modern kitsch . . . is impregnated both with blood and saccharine" (65). The melancholic and nostalgic, I hope to show, are linked to class values and inflect writing instruction precisely because of composition's investment in discursive subjectivity. Nostalgic and melancholic kitsch are both present in the writing classroom and students often write in the former mode to be countered by the teacher's interest in the latter. Yet the distinction is not always so clear cut, in part due to the ambiguity of what constitutes middle-class and working-class cultures.

Nostalgia and Melancholy

According to Olalquiaga, nostalgic and melancholic kitsch both have a connection to memory, loss, and death, but nostalgic kitsch is based on the erasure of loss and death while melancholic kitsch fetishizes it. In her words, "Melancholic kitsch revels in memories because their feeling of loss nurtures its underlying rootlessness. Nostalgic kitsch evokes memories in order to dispel any such feelings" (296). The nostalgic variety also "yearns after an experience whose lack is precisely glossed over by the desire for a utopian origin, producing a perfect memory of something that never really happened" (293). Nostalgic kitsch is perhaps what we are most familiar with and certainly, it would seem, the sort of kitsch referenced in relation to political manipulation and the masses. Nostalgic kitsch creates feelings of belonging through clichés that *deny* loss or imperfection. According to this schema, the kitsch of the plastic flower bouquet or the fluffy kitten greeting card lies in its defiance of decay and its

erasure of the accompanying loss and disorder. Melancholic kitsch romanticizes and often essentializes that loss, as in a coming of age or loss of innocence tale, for example.

Olalquiaga illustrates both types of kitsch by outlining possible cognitive and emotional responses in relation to one novelty store object: a silicon cube that contains a petri-fied hermit crab, whose name is Rodney. If one looks at this object as an existential prompt and sees a perpetual reminder of the demise of Rodney, one is in the realm of melancholic kitsch. If on the other hand the silicon preservation of Rodney inspires obliviousness to the crab's death and instead creates an ever-present Rodney, we have nostalgic kitsch. "Nostalgic kitsch is static . . . it just oscillates back and forth between the glorified experience and its subject, without any transformation. In melancholic kitsch . . . the passage of time is fundamental precisely because it is the transitoriness of all things, the continual flight into death that seduces this sensibility" (122).

This last statement is evocative of the personal essay with its melancholic, bitter-sweet "truths" and "revelations" and often ironic, controlled emotional responses. This is the type of personal writing frequently cited as "mature." But often student writing does not exhibit this type of "maturity." To the dissatisfaction of many writing teachers, students frequently provide personal accounts that are judged as sentimental and overly-generalized. Rather than *melancholic* kitsch, student narration of personal experience, much to the consternation of instructors who are looking for something "deeper," may contain platitudes and optimistic clichés typical of *nostalgic* kitsch.

David Bartholomae and Thomas Newkirk have discussed encountering the "problem" of unsophisticated emotion, cliché, and "commonplaces" in student writing and the need for adjustment. While Bartholomae sees deficit—lack of critical thinking—in "common sense," Newkirk attempts a more empathetic reading. Newkirk attributes the disjunction between teacher and student expectations to a variety of causes, ranging from what he sees as Aristotle's deprecation of emotion to literary modernism's elevation of irony. He acknowledges, citing Bourdieu, the connection between class and aesthetics, suggesting that "discomfort with emotional appeals is a feature of the 'aesthetic disposition' assumed by those who belong (or seek to belong) to a cultural aristocracy" with writing teachers being part of that milieu (27).

Building on Newkirk's and Olalquiaga's distinctions, I am suggesting that the more sophisticated handling of emotion is no less kitsch than the unsophisticated "common sense" deplored in some student writing. The sophisticated kitsch preferred by teachers is melancholic in nature and perhaps more typical of the elite sensibilities of the middle class. The nostalgic kitsch of the student narratives, rather than merely symptomatic of "immaturity," may instead be part of a non-elite aesthetic. The cultural values of each group are reflected,

respectively, in the “realism” of the two types of kitsch, similar to the way the academic painting of the nineteenth century reflected, in Celebonovict’s view, middle-class ideals.

Kitsch and Culture Clash in the Classroom

In the *Bedford Introduction to Literature*, an invidious comparison is set up between two works of fiction: an excerpt from a Harlequin romance novel, Karen Vanderzee’s *A Secret Sorrow*, and a “literary” short story, Gail Godwin’s “A Sorrowful Woman.” The novel takes up the dilemma of Faye, who has an internal injury affecting her fertility. She breaks off a relationship because she knows her boyfriend wants children. He tells Faye that he still loves her and that they can adopt. By contrast the Godwin story describes a woman whose perfect life—understanding husband, beautiful child, comfortable home—causes her to have angst and commit suicide. The editor attempts to elicit a distinction between literary and formulaic fiction through an introduction that grapples with the difference between the two genres and a series of questions that illustrate this difference as it plays out in the examples.

While the editor tries not to come across as a snob, paying lip service to the legitimate “entertainment” function of formula fiction, the effect of the exercise is to assert the artistic merit of the short story and to steer students away from genre fiction. The textbook poses questions like: “How is the woman’s problem in ‘A Sorrowful Woman’ made more complex than Faye’s in *A Secret Sorrow*?” and, “Can both stories be read a second or third time and still be interesting? Why or why not?” That *A Secret Sorrow* is formulaic is true enough. That it is kitsch is true enough, too. It certainly seems to conform to the fake art idea where a happy ending inspires sentiment devoid of complexity. Politically and socially, the formula supports a conservative ideology in its portrait of a happily married wife and mother. The Harlequin romance has the features of neo-right-wing social realism. With its neat resolution as an effacement of loss and death, these novels can be located in the camp of nostalgic kitsch as described above. But while the romance is kitsch, so too, I would argue, is the story that Bedford editor Michael Meyer identifies as literary. Meyer doesn’t stress the generic features of Godwin’s story, focusing instead on its “complexity” as a key component of its literariness. But that “complexity” may be seen as part of the formula that underlies what Meyer and others are calling “literary.” While the romance novel’s formula is understandable from the perspective of nostalgic kitsch, the “complexity” of the literary story may be explained in terms of a melancholic kitsch that revels in feelings of existential loss. The “literary” story, in its melancholic kitsch, is part of an elite aesthetic that is often privileged in writing and literature classes.

The melancholic tone is established in the opening lines of Godwin’s “A Sorrowful Woman”: “One winter evening she looked at them: the husband durable, receptive, gentle;

the child a tender golden three. The sight of them made her so sad and sick she did not want to see them ever again (30)." The story proceeds to chart the woman's withdrawal from the roles of wife and mother, which culminates in the image of her suicide: "Look, Mommy is sleeping," said the boy. "She's tired from doing all our things again." He dawdled in a stream of the last sun for that day and watched his father roll tenderly back her eyelids, lay his ear softly to her breast, test the delicate bones of her wrist. The father put down his face into her fresh-washed hair" (34). What is the nature of the "complexity" here that distinguishes this story from the kitsch of the romance novel? The lyricism of the opening paragraph is connected immediately to loss that is sustained throughout the narrative as Godwin explores the *ennui* that afflicts the character. It is this relationship to loss, as defined by Olalquiaga, that marks the story as melancholic kitsch. For while the nostalgic kitsch of the romance novel resolves and eliminates loss in its unbearably happy ending, Godwin's story crystallizes that loss in its unhappy one. The aestheticized and fetishized loss (essentially romantic in nature) is, I would argue, fundamental to the design of the story's "complexity."

"They find the stability of the couple's life gratifying, often remarking how wonderful it would be to find such a man."

While I, too, prefer Godwin's story to the Harlequin novel—that is to say, I prefer the sentimentalization of loss to the sentimentalization of wifedom and motherhood—I have found that many students do not. The elite aesthetic may privilege loss, but students often prefer the nostalgic to the melancholic. A "developmental" explanation would suggest that such students need to be disabused of their "commonplace" notions as they enter into university discourse. But when I consider student response, the scenario becomes complicated by class and gender. Often students who prefer the romance novel—usually women (the target audience)—identify with how terrible the heroine must feel about not being able to have children. They are impressed with and envious of the understanding husband who loves her anyway. They find the stability of the couple's life gratifying, often remarking how wonderful it would be to find such a man.

While students' ready acceptance of the novel's definition of wife and mother might be galling to a feminist and perhaps frequently read as a lack of perspicacity, such acceptance is perhaps understandable and functional within the context of working-class lives, just as Gail Godwin's melancholic critique of wifedom and motherhood, deemed "literary," is useful

to the middle-class feminist who seeks to dismantle the trappings of middle-class life. The romance novel, however, depicts an idealized portrait of middle-class life that can be appealing to those who do not have, yet aspire to, that status (or, as Celebonovict suggests with regard to bourgeois realism, accept that status uncritically). Such a reading of student response is suggested by the bewilderment that the same students often express over the Godwin story. While the angst may be immediately recognizable for someone who can afford to deconstruct middle-class ideals, working-class students who lack a sense of entitlement have often been baffled by the woman's behavior. How on earth could she be unhappy when she has a wonderful husband, a beautiful child, a lovely home and apparently no financial worries? Why would anybody in such circumstances want to kill herself? And why would anybody want to read such a story or find it interesting? Rather than intellectually deficient, this response can be understood as a class-based rhetoric that makes visible the middle-class assumptions contained within the literary reception of texts. Just as working-class students may be unable to appreciate the "literary" merit of "A Sorrowful Woman," middle-class teachers may be unable to see just how steeped the story is in its invisible middle-class values, even as the text attempts an interrogation of the same.

While Godwin's story is precisely an exploration of those questions, it is instructive to think about the direction that exploration takes, particularly as it relates to sentimentality. For the story certainly has its own sort of sentimentality even as it cynically parodies the middle-class family (the epigraph reads: "Once upon a time there was a wife and mother one too many times") (Godwin 30). In his discussion of belief and sentimentality in student writing, Newkirk effectively points to this divide between nostalgic and melancholic kitsch. Newkirk sees the "eulogies" and "testimonials" of freshman writing that "show loyalty . . . draw a lesson . . . affirm traditional values" and are "very one-dimensional, sometimes sentimental," even "maudlin and dishonest" as serving a positive function for students' sense of development (56). Teachers prefer narratives that disrupt the cultural shorthand of such kitsch, that "free us from the weight of nostalgia" and "liberate us from conventional expectations that age brings a form of wisdom, that nature provides solace, that motherhood is holy" (63). But the teacher's "aesthetic that values irony, complexity, and ambiguity" can constitute its own predictable paradigm (56). Dawn Skorczewski wonders whether

teacher preference for multiple meanings and critical thought over cliché reflects our resistance to authority figures who have urged us towards the same clichés that our students have benefited from. How many of us, for example, have felt belittled by gendered codes of behavior? How often do we speak of having been bound by silence to painful "family values"? If so, critical thought is a kind of safe house for us in the same way that cliché can be for our students. (234)

Such “critical thought” may itself become an elitist cliché, anchored in an aesthetic of melancholic kitsch that privileges and crystallizes skepticism and irony. Like a snake eating its own tail, this aesthetic of melancholy, in an ironic affirming of its own value, tears down what nostalgic kitsch seeks to uphold.

Is it accurate to say that teachers prefer “multiple meanings” and “critical thought”? To what extent does this elitist or literary aesthetic coincide with a middle-class sensibility? Where do middle-class college writing instructors fall on Wallerstein’s divide of bourgeois versus artist/intellectual and which cultural definition of bourgeois best represents them? What about working-class students who may be encountering academic culture for the first time? Class affiliations are dynamic and over-determined as are the values associated with those affiliations. These ambiguities have bearing on what counts as “good writing” in the college classroom and, consequently, the goal of subjectivity engendered there. Recasting the conflicts in terms of nostalgia and melancholy offer another means of mapping these cultural terrains.

To further illustrate the difficulties of defining class culture, I return to Lynn Bloom’s characterization of what she asserts are middle-class values and their relevance to composition. Bloom lists what she argues are characteristics of the American middle classes: respectability, decorum/propriety, moderation/temperance, thrift, efficiency, order, cleanliness, punctuality, delayed gratification, and critical thinking. She suggests that such features saturate writing theory and pedagogy and are based in American eighteenth- and nineteenth-century rhetorical and social practices. While this battery of adjectives certainly seems suggestive of the bourgeois emphasis on industry (excluding, maybe, the nebulous “critical thinking”), questions still arise as to what extent these characteristics are indeed “middle class” or exclusively so. Some of the features seem inconsistent with the hedonism and aristocratic dimensions of contemporary middle-class life. Many of Bloom’s categories characterize values associated with the stable working class. I wonder if these qualities are not more accurately viewed as values the American middle classes desire the working classes to possess to ensure the latter’s usefulness.

The term “critical thinking” strikes a note of intellectualism whereas the other traits have a moralistic flavor. Skorczewski’s observation that teachers have a penchant for “critical thought” begs a question about the nature of this “critical thought” and its connection to a class perspective. In the context of Bloom’s list, “critical thinking” is undergirded by concerns such as propriety, temperance, and thrift. Just how critical is such thinking, and where is the room for entertaining “multiple meanings”? In fact the schema that Bloom identifies sounds more like a prescription for sticking to a straight and narrow that would exclude a wide range of inquiry. While Bloom’s list is, at least in part, descriptive of the composition enterprise, the

cataloguing of puritanical, middle-class values ignores the aristocratic and intellectual aspects of the middle class. What is important for my discussion here is that her view of the nature and purpose of the composition class would place it in the realm of nostalgic kitsch rather than the melancholic kitsch that I have associated with an elitist aesthetic of complexity.

These complications suggest that the first-year writing course is caught somewhere between the two types of kitsch, the vacillation attributable in part to the complexities of social class perspectives, as I've suggested above, and also to composition's abiding concern with subjectivity and development. In the case of the latter factor, the collapsing of the distance between text and writer matters. For it is easy enough to celebrate loss and irony in a text we consider literary and impersonal but far more difficult to rail against sentimentality in a text we read as a representation of a student's life. Further, as Bloom identifies, composition promotes the production of texts that mirror the values it seeks to inculcate in its students. Thus instructors, whose sensibilities are located in the competing discourses of middle-class aesthetics, might have a soft spot for writing that reveals an aesthetic of earnest industriousness even as they are disappointed in its "commonplaces." Conversely, an English professor might find rebelliousness and irreverence interesting in literature while taking a dim view of these qualities when they show up in student work (and, even more so, in behavior).

Embodiments of Nostalgic and Melancholic Kitsch

These complexities can be illustrated through a review of two sample student essays that are used as grade exemplars at an urban community college. These essays, along with the grades they received, show some of the intricate contradictions bound up in expectations of student writing. I read these texts as embodiments of the nostalgic and melancholic kitsch that vie in the institutional discourses about "good writing" in a non-elite college where the student population is largely working class and minority. My reading will indicate not only the contradictions within the elite aesthetic of middle-class writing instructors but also the ways in which nostalgia and melancholy conflict within student writing and our interpretation of that writing.

What follows are two essays from a norming packet that represent an "A" and a "C" grade, respectively. In the packet the essays are accompanied by rationale for the assigned grade. While these rationales couch their critiques in craft-based issues of development, organization, and style, I contend that they also illustrate Bloom's thesis about the normative, and what she calls middle-class, nature of freshman composition. Consequently, the essays illustrate the tensions between melancholic and nostalgic kitsch as these aesthetics interweave themselves in the ideological landscape of the classroom.

The "A" Essay

In the article "Getting Involved" the author makes a statement about the extent to which Americans are concerned about other people's problems. She points out the thought very often encountered in our society, today. The truth is, she says, that people are indifferent about what happens around them. It does not really matter if a person is being robbed right in front of us, as long as that person is not us. It is none of our business, or it should be none of our business according to Quindlen. Why should we get involved, she asks. Reading the article, one can deduce that individualism has become a basic style of life in today's society.

Often, people tend to turn to outside agencies such as police, rather than acting themselves. However, sometimes not even professionals such as police are called upon, because people are afraid to get involved. The case of Kitty Genovese supports this argument the best. The young woman was stabbed to death while her neighbors were watching and listening. Nobody did anything. Now, I wonder where are the responsibilities one human being has towards his neighbor. If those neighbors had a bit of morality Kitty Genovese should not have been dead. They were morally obliged to call the police and thus, at least attempt to save the life of their neighbor.

Traditional ethics, which implied duties of one human being towards another have been replaced with the "New Morality". The new set of ethics is emerging in society today, which in its foundation has an impenetrable individualism. Mind your own business says on the faces of today's generation. As long as we are not affected in any way, we should not take any steps towards stopping or at least attempting to stop, lets say a robber or an abuser. This is justified by saying that interference may get us involved and put us in a conflicting situation, where we do not want to be. However, as a result of such indifference victims are falling everyday. Many of them would have been alive if people had listened to their moral consciousness at all.

This brings in my mind another case, in which a young man named Joey Levick was left to die in a ditch near a busy highway. It all happened in Seattle when three young men headed for a party after getting heavily intoxicated in a Seattle nightclub. On their way to a party, the car stopped and something was wrong with the engine, apparently. The three young fellows pulled over and got into a fight. Joey Levick was beaten up by his pals so severely that he suffered multiple brain damage, doctors said later. Joey was left unconscious in a ditch almost beaten to death by his friends who ran away. One of the youngsters whose name was Jason I think stopped by his sister's and brother-in-law's house and told them what had happened. They did not respond because they did not want to get involved they claimed when interviewed on 20/20. Eventually, the third young man told the entire story to his mother but she did not do anything either. When Joey Levick was found he was pronounced dead. However, the death came about as a result of his inability to lift his head out of the ditch which caused him to suffocate. If anyone were there to help him lift his head,

he would have survived, the physicians declared. In spite of being informed of what had occurred people did not react. I recall Joey's mother saying in tears "They are monsters. They let my son die just because they didn't want to get involved."

Cases such as these occur everyday and people die everyday as a result of other people's irresponsibility. Individualism has lead to a pluralistic society in which everyone cares only for themselves. "No man is an island" Johnne Donne once said and people should stop being isolated individuals who are blind to see others' burdens.

The "C" Essay

One modern example of how America views "getting involved" is to go back to World War II and look at how long it took America to get involved in the war. America was forced into war with the attack on Pearl Harbor. All the while Hitler was committing genocide in Europe.

This is Anna Quindlens America, stiff lipped and cold. I can't say I subscribe to Ms. Quindlens views on "getting involved," however her view may stem from "sucker phobia". What I mean is she is afraid of being used or worst becoming a victim while trying to help a supposed victim.

Though I can comprehend her view I can't agree. My reasons are as follows; In a situation where a stranger approaches you for help you only seconds to decide if you are going to help or turn away. My first instinct is to help and the next moment say "wait, asses the situation. Take a moment and ask for more information on their situation. Look for clues to see if their plea is legitimate. Use common sense! For example a plea to use your phone is bull. "Heres a quarter or call collect," works for me.

Armed with common sense we can all help to prevent a horrible crime or stop one in progress.

This common sense can be applied all over the world and not just here in New York. Helping one and other is a basic human function. We have to sustain it order for there to be a "kindler gentler" world for us and our children. There will be animals who will try to "play" us but with common sense we can't be played.

We have to rememeber these animals will try to play us in a slick way. They won't just run up to us and take our stuff and run they want to make us drop our guard to come in for the kill. If we stay sharp we will be safe almost every time. I say almost because there are crazy people out there.

I will teach my children to help others and to discriminate with much common sense. No one should decide ahead of time to not help anyone at anytime. Use your common sense to take your time and the decide to offer help or say "I can't get involved"

As a former teacher of the freshman composition course at this college, I tried to help students understand grades by showing them these two essays and asking them to guess the

grade that each received. I also asked students to say which one they liked better and why. While some students unequivocally like the “A” paper, it was not uncommon for many to recognize the first paper as an “A” while actually preferring the “C” paper. These same students were often surprised to find out that the “C” paper was graded as low as it was (often they feel it should merit a “B”). As one student once explained it, she liked the “C” paper, but she guessed it was graded down because of the way it used “ebonics.” As she elaborated, I understood the student to be referring to rhetorical style. Some students like the straightforward character of the “C” essay (this is especially true when the essays are read out loud) and become impatient with the circumlocution and belabored quality of the “A” essay. I’m interested in a comparison of these two papers particularly because I too, along with some of my students, like the “C” paper better than the “A,” although I am able to understand what was appealing to the grading committee about that latter paper. While the “A” paper, to my mind, has a tedious and predictable quality that makes paying attention to it difficult, I also am aware that (along, no doubt, with its surface correctness) its detached, polite, deferential tone gives it the desired air of “maturity” that I imagine the grading committee found laudable. Below I reproduce the grading committees’ comments on both essays in their entirety, and I will refer back to them as I proceed with my analysis:

The grade is A. This is a strong, effective essay.

The writer orients the reader by referencing the Quindlen article being analyzed.

The writer briefly states and discusses one of the main ideas in the article.

The writer presents a thesis-centered essay that focuses on the issue of “individualism in modern society.”

The ideas are nicely organized into paragraphs which have topic sentences that are developed.

The writer uses examples from the text and from personal resources to support the thesis.

The writer moves smoothly from the general to the specific, and the ideas seem to follow a logical development.

Ideas are presented fluently in sentences that are varied and linked with transitions. The vocabulary is well suited to the topic and there is a good command of grammar and general mechanics (punctuation and spelling), despite a few problems with punctuation, word choice, and word omissions.

Here are comments about the “C” essay:

The grade is C.

The essay gets off to a good start as the writer attempts to orient the reader by referring to the Quindlen article, but the discussion of the text is too brief.

There seems to be a passionate voice in the essay.

Even though a thesis is not stated clearly, the essay focuses on a main idea.

The writer uses examples to support a position.

The paper becomes weak as the writer makes unsubstantiated generalizations.

The language is uneven, lapsing into informal/conversational speech.

As the essay progresses, there are increasing problems with mechanics (spelling, punctuation).

What I find most striking in the “A” paper is its *indirectness*, the way it beats around the bush, in contrast to the “in-your-face” quality of the “C” essay. This indirectness probably accounts for the difficulty I have sticking with the “A” paper, but it is also responsible for the

“says what it has to say with an abruptness that is unpalatable, even impolite, from the perspective of the grading committee.”

sense of decorum that pervades the piece.

Indeed in the rationale that accompanies the essays in the grading packet, the “A” essay is praised for the way it “moves smoothly” and uses “well-suited” vocabulary and is “nicely organized” (emphasis added).

The measured tone of the “A” paper, then, is in direct contrast to the aggressiveness of the “C” paper, which is described in the rationale as “passionate,” a term that has

historically been connected with descriptions of mob activity and the “lower orders.” The “C” essay is also denigrated for “lapsing

into informal/conversational speech,” which is, I think, a key component of said “passion.”

In short, the writer of the “C” essay does not dance the slow, elaborate dance of the “A” essay. The “C” essay says what it has to say with an abruptness that is unpalatable, even impolite, from the perspective of the grading committee. Certainly the very first paragraph of that essay, with its reference to America’s involvement in World War II, has a pithy, “what more is there to say?” quality to it. And this economy almost ends the essay before it has a chance to begin, a fatal error in the realm of the timed essay exam.

While there are clearly more surface errors in the “C” essay (which may be a bigger part of its “C”-ness than the grading committee is willing to let on), I wonder how much more substantive the “A” essay is. Does it contain those “complexities” and “ambiguities” that writing teachers purportedly like to see? Its message (and that does seem to be the right term to use) is a simple condemnation of an ethic of self-interest. There are few areas of gray in the moral schema that the essay outlines. Interestingly, the “C” essay seems to grapple with the question in a more complex way, attempting a position of mediation between self-interest and social responsibility. And while the “C” essay in the grading criteria is accused of making “unsubstantiated generalizations,” it’s clear that the “A” essay makes its share of the same.

The statements, “as a result of such indifference victims are falling everyday” and “cases such as these occur everyday” and “individualism has led to a pluralistic society in which everyone cares only for themselves” serve their purpose within the “A” writer’s argument (they constitute the argument), yet how well would these assertions bear up under scrutiny?

My point here is not to criticize the writer but rather to understand the grading criteria and the underlying values. While the “A” essay is praised for elaboration, the “C” essay is penalized for its reliance on unstated assumptions about the reader’s ability to connect the dots, a feature Ong would associate with orality or, in this case, as the grading committee observed, the “conversational” quality of the language. Newkirk has observed a similar reluctance on the part of his students to expatiate in accordance with teacher’s expectations. He finds that other students, on hearing their classmates’ texts, often don’t have the same problem with student minimalism that the instructor has: “I speculate that students are often readier to elaborate from their own experiences, to fill in gaps; they sometimes resist the call for a greater density of detail by saying it bogs the paper down and doesn’t leave enough room for the reader’s imagination” (Newkirk 33). Newkirk is sympathetic to this alternative student aesthetic, which he sees as a developmental issue related to his students’ youth.

But regardless of student age, perhaps class enters into the equation along the lines suggested in an analysis such as Basil Bernstein’s restricted and elaborated linguistic codes. Ohmann, for example, building on and critiquing the Bernsteinian school, acknowledges the correlation between physical work and restricted language codes and mental work and elaborated codes. “Physical workers,” for example, “must learn to take orders without asking why” and thus rely on restricted codes in communication that are heavily tied to assumptions of context (Ohmann 10). In this light, I find it interesting that the “C” paper is so concerned with the issue of “common sense,” that same “common sense” that Bartholomae has seen fit for the university to eradicate from the student repertoire. If what the writer is arguing is common sense—an enthymeme, a trope that the writer can count on the audience understanding—then there is no need to elaborate further. As attested to in my students’ appreciation of the essay, the writer has achieved some degree of success in this reliance on “common sense.”

Is essay “A” being rewarded for its appeal to middle-class sensibilities and is essay “C” being penalized for its failure to transcend a restricted working-class code? I am in part suggesting this possibility, but I also find the situation more complex than that dichotomy. Certainly the charge made against the “C” essay of “unsubstantiated generalizations” points to a dissatisfaction with the restricted code of “common sense” that constitutes the writer’s major rhetorical strategy. Likewise it is the strategy of nostalgic kitsch that relies on uninterrogated consensus and effacement of loss as the essay offers pragmatic optimistic solutions of compromise. And yet, as I pointed out, this compromise contains a level of the lauded “com-

plexity" that is missing from the other essay. Despite the "A" essay's elaboration, it does not demonstrate the level of problematizing that we might expect to see validated by middle-class intellectualism. The simple moral drawn from the *20/20* story, for example, that someone should have pulled Joey Levick from the ditch, ignores the "problem" of how he got into the ditch in the first place; alcohol abuse and unchecked violence (and no doubt poverty) are a big part of the Joey Levick story and certainly societal problems worthy of note. To conclude that the tale is an example of America's problem with individualism is the sort of simplification that nostalgic kitsch (like the timed essay exam) elicits.

Applying Bloom's middle-class criteria also points to contradictions. The "A" essay seems to violate the values of thrift and efficiency in its use of language while the "C" essay epitomizes said virtues. Although "A" rates high in the "decorum and propriety" category while "C" is down right rude, "C" in some ways appears to do better with the "moderation" criteria than "A" in as much as "C" takes a more temperate position on the issue of getting involved. What "A" does have in abundance is the wistful tone of melancholic kitsch that embodies loss. This is evident throughout essay "A," in its concluding "no man is an island" and especially in its lament over the loss of the idyll: "Traditional ethics, which implied duties of one human being towards another have been replaced with the 'New Morality.' The new set of ethics is emerging in society today, which in its foundation has an impenetrable individualism."

The difference in tones between the two essays is, of course, very notable, and it's tempting to conclude that essay "A" is being rewarded for its sense of melancholy that appeals to elitist tastes. But it is not only melancholy that is present here. The sense of deference so evident in "A" is notably lacking in "C." I think it is worthwhile to speculate on the place of such deference, not only in college writing courses in general, but particularly in the non-elite community college. Bloom notes how teachers expect student writing "to reflect subordination appropriate to the normative student-teacher relationship" (660). Is this expectation exacerbated in non-elite institutions where the student population is largely working class and minority? At such institutions are teachers particularly pleased by students who write essays "smoothly" and "nicely" because such writing is evidence of the success of the community college's civilizing mission? And conversely, under these circumstances, are teachers particularly offended by displays of "passion" that violate bourgeois notions of politeness? The complicated, ambiguous nature of middle-class culture might present something of a conundrum to working-class students on the outside looking in. What will their middle-class teachers appreciate? The romanticized "passion" of the non-elite that might appeal to the artist/intellectual or the bourgeois politeness of the "smooth" and "nice"? Which aspect of middle-class culture to emulate? What to do?

Such factors complicate the dialectic of nostalgic and melancholic kitsch that I see operating in writing instruction so that the case is not simply a face-off between teachers' melancholy and students' nostalgia, although that may sometimes be in evidence. Teachers might teach a literary aesthetic of melancholic kitsch even as they demand the nostalgic variety in student writing as demonstration of compliant subjectivity. Until they actually get it. Then teachers are likely to complain of clichés and commonplaces. Unlike the study of literature where we can afford to be more clear cut in our aesthetic choices, writing instruction is complicated by a preoccupation with subjectivity and a conflation of writing style with personality—an imperative to consider lives as well as texts. “Like swimmers passing through the chlorine footbath en route to plunging into the pool, students must first be disinfected in Freshman English” so that they and their writing will evince the sense of middle-class propriety the university and the workplace demand (Bloom 656). If Bloom is right, then the goal of freshman composition is to promulgate kitsch that, in effect, eliminates, or at least hides, deviation and uncertainty. Such erasure might also take with it the beginnings of any critical rhetoric inconsistent with the perspective Bloom identifies as middle class. In that case, we have as much to contend with in bourgeois realism as we do in the kitsch of the working class.

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John Paul Tassoni, Richard Lee Walts,
and Sara Webb-Sunderhaus

Deep Shit: A Dialogue about Rhetoric, Pedagogy, and the Working Class

Setting: Graduate course in the Histories and Theories of Rhetoric and Composition

Sara: Masters student in Literature/Teaching Assistant

Rick: Doctoral student in Rhetoric and Composition/Teaching Assistant

John: Graduate instructor on loan from a regional campus

Action: A listserv after-class group

Within 48 hours from the end of each session, we (the instructor and students) would post responses to an email listserv, asking follow up questions, adding comments we didn't have time for during class, elaborating on issues we talked about. The dialogues listed below are excerpted passages drawn directly from these after-class conversations. For clarity, we've smoothed out some rough sentences and slipped in some contextual information here and there. We've also grouped our conversations under specific headings to help us better convey the unfolding narrative and the theoretical and pedagogical discussions that transected it; otherwise, the posts appear basically in their initial form. The only exception here is the article's concluding section, which Sara authored after our course was over in an attempt to add some closure to the action.

We were a class of three, two students and one instructor, who all, within the first 15 minutes of our first class meeting, self-disclosed as working-class academics, closed the classroom door, and started saying things like, "We're not going to do what they tell us." And, of course, we started talking about shit: shit we put up with, emerge from, steer clear of, dive into, and dish out. Talking about shit, using the word "shit," seemed to signal for each of us that we were somehow stepping outside but alongside the scripts and counterscripts that too often shape student/teacher discourse, signal for us "third space" moments when we were stepping out of shit we'd just as soon do without and stepping into deep shit that we needed to trod in to be more critical and more humane educators.

We talked about other readings and issues in our "after-class group," but frequently circled back to themes represented in the selections offered here. We sometimes began,

sometimes concluded, each session with a discussion of our listserv conversations, so we consistently returned to our dialogue in light of other texts we were reading (not necessarily those that had been assigned) and new issues that had arisen in our lives outside of the course. As a result, our reflections on our roles as critical pedagogues in light of Sara's struggles to define her responsibility toward a troubled student preoccupied us throughout the semester. Because we offer here our actual dialogue, we've left ourselves no room for any kind of substantial revision and, as such, left ourselves open for shit—even, in a way, invited it. We didn't have all the answers then, and we certainly don't have them all now. What we can stand behind is the truth of the struggle represented here, the struggle to find a language we could make meaning with, one that could ensure a productive place in academia for ourselves and for students like Sara's, first-generation students whose life circumstances don't always meld easily with campus life at public ivys.

1. What Kind of Shit Is This?

John: I'm noticing that shit is becoming one of our generative themes (related, of course, to the broader one of working-class pedagogies/rhetorics). One person might think they are taking no shit while they are in the act of giving shit. I'd say, there's "not taking shit" and there's "not taking shit." In the context of an authoritarian, anti-dialogic approach, taking no shit has a limiting function—it steers students back into the realm of expected behaviors and conclusions. In the context of an augmentative approach, taking no shit provides for just what Sara suggests—everyone's chance to voice. Augmentative no-shit-taking, in other words, facilitates. And even along these lines, we can take no racist, sexist, elitist shit, and not take this shit in ways that spur dialogue and reflection, or we cannot take this shit in ways that bury anti-democratic views, leaving them fester.

As for the word itself, I'm thinking "shit" carries an edge; if you come from a background sensitive to rhetoric about shit, as we do, you can sort of unite around the word. When at any given moment we deem something shit, we all kind of understand what the other is talking about because as teachers, as academics, as working-class individuals we face a lot of the same shitty challenges—competitive peers, the strange rhythms of committees, etc. "Shit" depends on and invites a kind of community, a kind of cultural identification.

However, I can see someone looking at our posts and reading shit as a kind of "X" in an algebraic equation, or even a mark of our own laziness, our fatigue in the face of issues and concepts that require much more precision. Indeed, there are times I could plug in words much more specific than "shit" to describe the circumstances I find myself in, the rhetorics I contend with, but then again that kind of precision might very well be reductive: "shit" allows for an interplay of varying forces that come into play in any institutional/pedagogical event,

and as I said before, the word invites those of us for whom it has a lot of utility (as well as takes a shot at those who'd prefer their academics a little more genteel).

Sara: Shit is looking at a student's breasts rather than her face when she makes a comment in class—something I took too much of as an undergraduate.

Shit is turning in a reading response (that deals with a piece about Black English) entitled, "Wahut' wrong wit us. I don't need no helb. I be doin' fine" that goes on to add, "We need to reduce the ghetto influence and only have the white society to be productive as a society." That's racist shit-directed towards minorities, the class text, and me as the teacher. It's something that I refuse to take and that I give back to the student by refusing to play head games with him.

Shit is assuming that a woman in graduate school must be working on a master's degree in elementary education—something I get from my husband's family and their friends.

Shit is skipping five of the first six classes of the semester, ignoring the attendance policy on the syllabus and the written warning the teacher gave that one more absence would result in being dropped from the class, and emailing the teacher, saying, "I have to be enrolled in this class in order to play sports!" Not taking shit is reminding the student that he had been warned that he would be dropped and that he now has to accept the consequences of his actions.

Shit is receiving an email that states, "Should you really be telling your students about those kinds of things?????" written by the above student who accidentally received an email forwarded to current students that publicized an event sponsored by the university's gay, bi, and lesbian alliance. Giving it is returning the email to that student and telling him that it's entirely appropriate to tell students of that event. Taking it is not telling the student that since I don't tell him how to play his position on the athletic team, he shouldn't tell me how to teach or relate to my students. Giving and taking it (giving to the current students, taking from this student) is not telling the student that undoubtedly there are gay students in the class who appreciated receiving this forward.

Shit is interrupting a graduate student in the middle of a formal presentation by questioning the pronunciation of a feminist theorist's name. Giving it back is smiling sweetly, telling the professor, "The other professors I've worked with pronounce it this way," and returning to the presentation.

Shit is writing this email—giving it, that is.

Rick: From various theoretical standpoints, linguists have sought to understand terms, phrases, etc. in language by means of context. For linguists such as Ferdinand de Saussure, the value of any given term is "accordingly determined by its environment," so that even the value of a word signifying "sun" is impossible without first considering its surround-

ings. For sociolinguists, as well as philosophers such as Mikhail Bakhtin, it is purely the social environment (and its inherent ideology) that gives meaning to words and to language as a whole. In terms of rhetoric, Aristotle defined *logos* as an argument that appeals to reason, *pathos* as the use of emotion in relation to the subject, and *ethos* as trust in a speaker's character or credibility. For the purpose of understanding "shit" as a word, term, or concept, I thought it would be useful to examine several contexts in which shit is used, recognizing the positive and negative uses of shit, as well as the instances of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*, expression of empowerment, rebellion, excitement and/or joy as expressed by shit. Thus:

- Shit! (expresses frustration, excitement, fear, anger)
- Bullshit! (contradiction, negation of request, exposure of a lie—a challenge to the *ethos* of a speaker)
- I'm not going to take this shit! (expression of defiance; also an example of *pathos*—emotion as in anger in an attempt to persuade, resolve)
- I've had enough of your shit! (confrontational, challenge)
- This shit is ridiculous! (challenge to argument/*enthymeme*/*syllogism* by use of *logos*)
- Don't give me your shit! (interpreted as an order or command, challenge, defiance)
- This is shit! (descriptive indication of negativity towards object, concept, ideology, challenge to *logos*)
- I don't believe this shit! (emotional expression of shock, confusion; also an ironic expression or expression of sarcasm)
- Eat shit! (verbal attack or abuse)
- Might as well take the shit in stride (acceptance of unpleasantness, expresses attitude of resignation)
- Man, she really knows her shit (positive indication or recognition of talent, work performed, positive reflection of a person's *ethos* or credibility)
- Man, this is good shit (expression of delight or joy towards an object)

Obviously, this can go on (and there's probably more to do here by means of further connecting shit with rhetoric, or with ideology in a Bakhtinian sense), yet in attempting to contextualize "shit," we are now in a better position to define shit in relation to our own particular environment in the university/comp department. From this perspective, how can we define shit in relation to our own social positions within the academy? How are grad students the "Janus Coin" of shit, both giving and taking shit, as well as refusing to take shit? How do our words reflect our shit?

In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Bakhtin claims that the natural or social ideological product known as the "sign" is material and possesses meaning. Through the laws

of dialectic materialism (which entail growth, change, and development), Bakhtin describes that which the ideological sign represents as something material that lies outside itself, acting as a “Janus Coin” in that it both reflects and refracts material reality (a “naturally occurring struggle of opposites” in dialectic materialist thought). Signs, Bakhtin says, occur as natural phenomenon and as a reflection of consumer culture (9-11).

But Bakhtin didn't name all aspects of the material sign, such as the shit that both reflects social ideology and creates social reality. Shit as ideology/Shit as identification. Working-class folks can certainly identify with shit as an ideology—the shit one is born into, the shit one absorbs from the social and physical environment, the shit that's unfair, discriminatory, hurtful, and unyielding. The shit as lies, as ideology, as propaganda. Shit as reification of the same old shit.

2. In Deep Shit

Sara: Tuesday I was reminded of just how much my gender and class affect the way I “take shit” from students, and for that matter, how I define the term. Unit Project #3 was due in my mailbox by five. When I picked up the projects, I found a note from one student stating that she would like to turn the paper in after spring break. The note ended with a rather cryptic comment about a recently diagnosed “medical condition,” effusive apologies, and a request for me to call her at home.

When I called her, she told me she thought she was pregnant, that she was afraid to tell her mother, and that she was fearful of the response her boyfriend threatened should she have an abortion. My heart broke for her. She is a first-generation college student—a characteristic that makes her different from the middle-class “norm” here on this campus. And, she is from the same working-class neighborhood and city where many of my relatives live, so I definitely know “where's she coming from,” literally and metaphorically. She'd come so far by being in college, all expenses paid. She had frequently told me how proud her mom was of her, how she couldn't let her down, and how she wanted to prove herself to all her “friends” who said she'd never make it in college.

Since my high school “friends” had said the same thing to me, and since I've always felt, and still feel, a similar pressure from my mother to “make it” and do all the things she could never do as a 1950's farm girl from northeastern Kentucky, I could really empathize with my student's feeling that she'd let down her mother and herself. So, when she began sobbing I had a split-second decision to make. Should I handle the situation by giving her a couple phone numbers and wishing her luck, as some of my colleagues would in their “professional” manner, or should I react as a feminist, as a friend, and as the big-sister-type figure I often feel when around my students? I could hear my education professors from

college warning me not to get “too close” as I decided, “Fuck it.” My student needed me, not some mythical, unfeeling “professional.”

I told her, “This is what we’re going to do. We’re going to get you tested and have you talk to some people so you can make an informed decision.” I gave her the number for the local Planned Parenthood and told her I’d take her, adding that she may not even be pregnant—home tests are notoriously unreliable—and that if she would be pregnant, I would support any decision she made.

“She had frequently told me how proud her mom was of her, how she couldn’t let her down, and how she wanted to prove herself to all her ‘friends’ who said she’d never make it in college.”

The more we talked, it became clearer and clearer that she wanted to have an abortion but didn’t know what she could tell her boyfriend, how she could pay for it, or how she would be able to get to a clinic (the nearest abortion clinic is 35 miles away). We discussed how she could talk to her boyfriend (including the use of lies), how she could pay for the abortion (sliding scale fees, loans, credit cards), and how she could get there—I told her I would take her if the local Planned Parenthood clinic didn’t have transportation to the abortion clinic. I finally gave her my home phone number, and after about an hour, we hung up.

Did I cross the mythical “line” that some of my colleagues refer to? These same colleagues would probably think that this student was giving me shit by missing class for “personal” reasons, not having

work done, asking me to make a long-distance call to her from my home, and “involving” me in her personal life. In response, I’d argue that “the line” needs to be crossed sometimes, ESPECIALLY when a student comes to me with a personal crisis. I’m the only person over eighteen she has told about any of this—she told me she had nowhere else to go, and sadly, I think she’s right. As a working-class woman, I’m not about to give her any grief, and I know there’s only overwhelming need behind her recent behavior and her motives for coming to me. How can that be shit? It can’t. I’ll tell you what is: the notion in the academy that we shouldn’t get “too involved” with students. Maybe my “fuck it” response to my internalized academic values is giving shit back to the source.

John: Sara! I can't believe how quickly you've gone from considering whether you should take shit to getting into some deep shit. I hope I'd have the wisdom and compassion you're showing toward your student to help even one of my closest friends should one of them get in such a situation, let alone help a student in one of my classes. What you're in personally points out to me the deep shit of students' daily lives in this culture of violence. It's what we have to let into our classrooms if we want our teaching to be relevant. It's also, as you indicate, what the academy in its traditional sense can write out of the curriculum. We want a curriculum that's responsive to such shit, that can sensitize students and colleagues to the sexist, racist, and economic realities that can generate such situations to begin with, and we want to help students and colleagues and ourselves develop the means to challenge and change society where need be.

If your story follows the lines of a traditional take-no-shit story, you never get to deep shit. Thinking of the kind of backgrounds students at my open-admissions campus come from, I often cringe when I hear colleagues talking about not taking shit from students. I've got to confess I cringed a little at first when you first brought up "taking no shit" early in the semester, that is, until I got to know you better. And this is the point here, if you don't know your student, don't respond to her as a person, you never get to the deep shit of her life—and I'm sure there's still a lot of teachers out there who'd say you're in shit too deep—but just think of the difference if you took no shit in a conventional sense, in a sense where this person appears only as a student (a working-class student in a public ivy, at that) who's missed a due date and a class session.

Another angle to all of this involves keeping students around. We didn't think this was such a big issue here on the main campus, where students have been successful throughout their school careers and are pretty much determined to earn their degrees one way or another. At worst, they'll drop out of our school only to attend another—one that will put up with their shit or one that won't give them shit, I guess. Your student's a different story, and I think her background almost demands you get to know her beyond the generic student/teacher roles. Since we started talking about shit, I've used it to scrutinize my students and my curriculum more carefully, wondering: What did I do to get shit? Do I deserve this shit? What does this shit mean? What does it tell me about the student who's giving it to me? Is this shit I can work with? Is this an instance where I need to give some shit?

Sara: John, I remember your cringe when I said that I don't take shit. I could tell from the look on your face that I scared you—"Oh, shit, I've got one of *those* teachers in my class." But, I also knew that my version of "taking no shit" was very different from what you expected (the conventional sense that you described in your post).

As a woman, and particularly as a youthful-looking, female graduate assistant, I get

different kinds of shit than either you or Rick get, and I may even get more of it at times. Because of those factors, I have to think about shit; it's a self-defense mechanism for me. I have to be prepared for students like Robert, the student I discussed in last week's class, who, by refusing to sit down and invading my personal space in a conference, try to "one-up" me and change the power dynamic inherent in a conversation about grading. I won't take that, for a variety of reasons. I don't want the shit-givers to think that what they're doing is acceptable, I don't want male students to think it's okay, and I don't want my female students to think that they should take it. I know that as first-year students, the majority of them are not used to any measure of reciprocity in the classroom, and it takes time for them to get used to the idea that the teacher is not the only adult in the classroom, that their words and actions can impact the teacher as much as the teacher can impact them, etc. They need to learn, though, and that learning starts with my refusal to take or give what I define to be shit.

There's shit like sexual harassment and sex crimes—issues I've dealt with personally—that specifically affects women even if we haven't been harassed, molested, or raped, because these acts create a climate of fear that works to control all women. This violence can limit our movement at night, our housing choices, the way we dress, the things we do for entertainment—in short, everything in our lives. Then there's shit that specifically affects women but falls disproportionately on working-class women, such as reproductive issues. My student's predicament illustrates this shit, and I understand it as well.

Growing up, there was so much family anxiety about my sexuality. Almost every family member assumed that I was having sex and was a "bad" girl because of it—my mother even told me I was promiscuous when I was fourteen. At thirteen and fourteen, I was warned that if I did become pregnant, I would have to drop out of school and my life would be over—the reality of a working-class family. By sixteen and seventeen, it was, "You'll never be able to go to college if you get pregnant! You're going to ruin your life!" (with a subtext of "you're going to ruin our lives, because we've put our hopes on you to be the one who 'makes it'"). With almost every boy I dated in college there was the articulated fear that I was going to drop out of school, have babies, and get

"At thirteen and fourteen, I was warned that if I did become pregnant, I would have to drop out of school and my life would be over—the reality of a working-class family."

married. So many attempts to control my “unruly” sexuality, with the central irony being that I never did any of the things of which my family accused me. And here I am, twenty-eight years old (at this writing), married for five years, and my mother still panics at the mere mention of my friends’ pregnancies: “Well, you can’t have any babies yet! You’d have to drop out of school! It’d all be over! Greg’s just gonna have to wait.” It doesn’t matter that neither my husband nor I want children right now or that having a child would not force me to drop out of school. What matters is my mother’s fear that I won’t “make it” after all and her personal reality that marriage and children meant, in many ways, that life was over. This is the reality of working-class women; we literally can’t afford to make certain sexual choices or “mistakes.”

John, you referred to the forces that limit students like mine a “culture of violence.” I don’t think that phrase goes far enough to describe what we as women (not to mention those of us who are working-class, of color, or lesbian) deal with every day of our lives. It’s not violence; it’s total destruction, and I’m sick of it (I can’t take any more of this shit!).

Rick: Wow! This student’s story really does bring it all home as far as working-class reality is concerned. I couldn’t agree more with John’s observation of the “deep shit of students’ daily lives in this culture of violence.” A culture of violence amply describes the context of shit-reality that is imposed in a general way towards the working class as a whole and in particular ways towards women, the gay and lesbian community, or people of color. For students like Sara’s, it seems the violence is imposed initially by the shit that all working class students face—economic pressure and the demands this places on a student (increased shit-load). And in regard to this student’s possible pregnancy, the shit plays itself out in the continuing struggle for women’s reproductive rights. If the social context surrounding women’s reproductive rights was indeed social and democratic, instead of patriarchal and reactionary, how would this impact the violence of blackmail and economic hardship (both logistically—35 miles from an abortion clinic, and economic) imposed on Sara’s student? Is this a context from which to pull some rhetorical uses of shit—“Shit!”; “This shit is ridiculous”; “This is shit!”; or “I don’t believe this shit!”? This culture of violence imposed on working-class students is shit, it’s ridiculous shit, and it’s shit that, were it not for the harsh reality that confirms its existence, is truly unbelievable.

3. The Usual Bullshit

Rick: Working-class kids are expected to adopt the attitude of “Might as well take the shit in stride.” And of course when working-class children aren’t prepared to think conceptually, and when they have little space and little voice, they don’t become leaders. They struggle to survive; their shit is silenced. I remember the first composition class I taught, a 101 class at the

University of Louisville. Either the first or the second day I asked the students to form groups and write a little about themselves and their expectations for the class. One group of students wrote that they weren't looking forward to the class because all it would do would be to reinforce what they already felt, and that was that they all "sucked" as writers. The class was composed of mostly working-class students who had to work to make ends meet. I read and heard some of the most conservative views and attitudes coming from young people at a time of their lives when you might expect open-mindedness or idealism. Homophobia, hostility to gains made by marginalized groups in society, cynicism towards the women's movement, towards Affirmative Action, welfare, and so on. Yet these views were always quite unexamined in their essays. Some issues, such as race, they didn't even want to discuss. They thought the real discrimination was against Christians who were silenced in the "liberal" education system. They were angry. They thought it was the work of liberals, feminists, the gay movement, or commie teachers like me who were responsible for stirring up the shit. For so many of my students, problems such as racism, sexism, etc. wouldn't exist if the discourse were silenced.

John: Wish I had more of a working-class conscious as an undergraduate. I'd have been more aware of the kinds of shit students probably put up with on a daily bases. I'd have been able to sail some of it back, hopefully to make my teachers more aware of the unnecessary and debilitating shit they were slinging (hopefully unconsciously). Then again, I might have been run out of town.

Of course, memories come back to me now in new contexts, but at the time I was taught that teachers had all the answers. And I believed this to the point of distrusting my own feelings. One example of the kind of shit I took involves my English teacher my freshman year. I started off pretty slowly in his class, but eventually put together a string of "A" papers. One day after a session he stopped in the hall to tell me how impressed he had been with my work. He followed up by asking me if I liked sports and if I ever considered being a sports writer. A sports writer? Where did he make that connection? I'm standing in front of him with my long hair, paint-stained jacket, and holey jeans, and this guy thinks I should look into sports writing—not creative writing, not graduate study, but sports writing. I wonder what he would have suggested to me had I been a woman.

Sara: He would have suggested that you become a high school English teacher. That's what I heard as a high school and college student. I do have to say, however, that some of these people (most notably my family) had little to no understanding of what it meant to be a graduate student or a professor (my family still doesn't understand what I do—and they'd die if they read this essay). My parents didn't go to college; my mother's parents and two of her brothers didn't make it past eighth grade. Going to graduate school,

becoming a professor . . . these things just didn't exist in my family's world, so they didn't exist in mine for a long time.

I remember thinking about graduate school during spring quarter of my junior year of college. I was taking "junior block," the nickname for the methods courses education majors take. While the courses weren't terrible, they didn't appeal to me the way they did to the other students; I felt that I was being led into a life that didn't quite fit, and I became even more convinced of that fact as I began my pre-student teaching. I began to wonder if I should apply to graduate school, something my best friend (a man) was going to do.

I decided to talk to one of my instructors about my doubts. She had just found out she had been accepted into a Ph.D. program, so she would be leaving at the end of the year. Given her experience, I thought she would be able to understand my concerns, and because we had developed a friendship outside of class, I really respected her opinions. She told me, "You don't want to go to graduate school! You'll never be able to get a job." I didn't understand her reasoning; after all, fear of not getting a job wasn't going to stop her from going back to school, and I knew she hadn't advised my friend against graduate school. "But he's different," the professor said. "He can't teach high school. Trust me, Sara, you're doing the right thing," she said as she led me out of her office. "This way you and Greg can get married sooner."

At the time, I was grateful for the professor's advice; now, I really question her motives. Was she really concerned about my economic stability, or was she engaging in a little gate-keeping? You both know the answer to that question, and deep down, I guess I know it, too.

Rick: I had no idea as to what I wanted to do when I graduated from dear ol' Southern High, a working-class school in southwestern Louisville that had the largest student population at the time. The high school took in students from several working-class neighborhoods, where kids' parents mostly worked at the Ford, General Electric, or International Harvester plants (I. H. later closed down and thousands were laid off). I didn't go to college until I had been out of high school almost 5 years. I always worked at some shitty job—I had absolutely no support from my parents. My father left the family and I rarely saw him. During the divorce, my mother took shock treatments at the local mental health facility where she met some guy from G.E. who was a substance abuser (alcohol). It was no time before he moved in with her and they eventually married. But he wasn't very generous. My first experience with college was at the downtown community college, where I was accepted into a two-year program for an Associates Degree in Applied Science. Although I had always loved literature and writing, I never thought I could make a living at it. For some reason, I didn't want to teach at the time (too many negative experiences from high school). I began working as a respiratory therapist at the hospital at night, the nursing home in the morning,

and taking classes in the afternoon. A lot of times I would go almost thirty hours without sleep. Years later, I decided I was tired of hospitals, and being around so many sick people always had me thinking I had cancer or something. I wanted out, so I began taking undergrad classes at U of L.

Of course, the shit I took and saw is quite different from what women, African-Americans, or gay students take. Hell, I'm the gender and color of the oppressor! But I did experience shit as a full-fledged member of the working class, and I remember the attitude those in power had towards the likes of scruffs like me. Towards the end of my undergraduate degree I decided to minor in philosophy. The chair of the philosophy department was my advisor.

"I remember the attitude those in power had towards the likes of scruffs like me."

During my first meeting with him, I was a little nervous. After all, this was a tenured doctor of philosophy who was also the department chair. I was a little undergrad grunt. At one point, we both started to say something at the same time and he angrily told me NOT to interrupt him again, looking at me as though he wanted to kill me. And I remember internalizing so many of those

class myths—never acknowledging on the outside that I thought I was inferior, but internalizing it just the same. Even after the objective working class shit of having no money and no security, it's the subjective, psychological shit that lingers—the psychology of class warfare.

4. Stepping in Your own Shit

Rick: Shit does seem to work as rhetorical/operative term, conveying a meaning here, absorbing a feeling there, playing emotive, angry, excitable, fearful and sometimes joyous dialogic roles. Shit is quite democratic. It plays all sides and is there for all people in almost every type of situation. In essence, shit is a hero—a "genuine rhetorical force" (as Charles Schuster defines hero in "Mikhail Bahktin as a Rhetorical Theorist"). In "The Bildungsroman" chapter of *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Bahktin describes the hero as a "point moving in space" having "no essential characteristics." In literature, he says, the hero's movement in space "enables the artist to develop and demonstrate the spatial and static social diversity of the world." (Aren't we constantly taking on shit? Shit is *mierda* in Spanish, *merde* in French, *sranje* in Serbo-Croatian.) Shit is social, and as such, is ideology. But shit isn't confined to any particular ideology.

Shit is a chameleon. Shit is a trace. It picks up here and changes form there. Shit is in our classrooms and in our heads. It's the inevitable work we must finish before the end

of the semester. Shit is in final exams, papers, and grades. As John mentions, shit bounces back and forth, giving and taking from both speaker and audience. Shit is on both sides of the binary and I'd be willing to bet that it also acts as a destabilizing force on the binary. Shit is a moving force that is at once definable and undefinable (this is shit; what is this shit). Like Bakhtin's definition of the hero as subject, shit moves in space but is not essentialized. Shit is social and diverse. And again, as John mentions, shit is both a locator of contested ground (this is the shit; the shit stops here; look at this shit; check your shit) and contests ground (I'm not taking this shit; bullshit; the hell with your shit; no more of this shit). Shit is a dynamic hero in time and space. Shit is in constant dialectical motion because as we see all around us and on a daily basis, shit happens. Shit is the prime force in Sara's student's tale.

Sara: Can you give yourself shit? I think I am in this whole situation with my student. The more and more I think about this whole thing, the more and more uncomfortable I'm getting. I'm glad I didn't tell her that her work was due on the due date, period. I'm even glad that I offered to take her to the doctor to confirm her pregnancy. But, I think by telling her that I'd take her to the clinic if she didn't have any other way to get there, I got myself way in over my head.

You're right, John; I'm in some deep shit, and right now, I feel as if I'm drowning in it. I responded to my student with my heart, trying not to give her shit, but now my head is responding, too. If she does decide to have an abortion, and if she tells me I'm her only way to get to a clinic, I don't know what I'm going to do. What if something would go wrong afterwards and she would start hemorrhaging in the car? What if I had a car wreck and she was hurt? What if either one of us would be hurt by protestors?

I don't want to deal with an angry boyfriend. And I don't want to deal with an angry mother either, and that could be very likely, especially if (God forbid) something would happen to her daughter. She could sue me and the university. Even if nothing "went wrong," I could still be in deep. It wouldn't matter that I've been encouraging my student to explore ALL of her options; it wouldn't matter that I've told her not to rush into having an abortion that she could later regret. The only thing that would matter would be the perception that I used my power as a teacher to manipulate a student. The bottom line of all of this is that if the shit hit the fan, I could lose my assistantship, and let's face it: if that happened, my academic career would be over. What graduate program would accept me with this type of controversy swirling around me?

I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't. Just thinking about all of this in theory, not dealing with it in reality, has made me a mess: I'm not sleeping, I'm having trouble eating, I'm not getting any of my own work done—and at this time of the semester, I'm absolutely

swamped. What will I be like if this situation becomes real? In my attempts to not give shit, am I giving myself shit?

John: We talked about the intricacies of keeping students around, and certainly your student's story speaks to this, but the challenges of taking no shit involves keeping ourselves around too. I don't know if you're giving yourself shit so much, Sara; I think you saw the shit you would need to take on, and then had to make a decision about how much shit you were willing to take. I'm not saying this necessarily means you need to compromise your principles—there are indeed reasonable limits to what you can do with your student—but the shit you do end up taking can point to the limits and possibilities of progressive pedagogy. It certainly points to what democratic aims are up against.

Since practicing a critical pedagogy means using the classroom to scrutinize cultural forces that intimately impact our students' lives, your story shows how this pedagogy challenges the borders of classroom walls. Practicing a critical pedagogy means taking on shit/taking no shit for sure, but it also gives you quite a glimpse of just how much there is, everywhere.

Sara: I just found out my student is pregnant. She came out of the test this morning determined to have the abortion, and somehow I'd gone from "last resort" to first and only option. Tonight I called my teaching mentor, MaryAnn. I knew that I had to get out of this mess, but I needed to hear it from somebody else—especially a woman who has far more teaching experience, is a committed feminist, and is someone I respect a great deal. That's MaryAnn, definitely.

MaryAnn "absolutely forbid" me to take my student to a clinic (her words). She pointed out all the dangers I mentioned in my earlier post: lawsuits, loss of assistantship, safety concerns, the works. She said she was thinking of my needs "because somebody has to, and you're only thinking of your student's needs." She told me I have to talk to my student immediately and tell her I can go no further with her. MaryAnn's right. I know she's right. But, God, I dread that conversation.

One thing MaryAnn kept telling me was that no matter what happens, it's not my fault. If my student stays in school, it's not because of me. If she drops out, it's not because of me. She chose to have unprotected sex, she'll choose how to deal with the repercussions of that, and she'll choose whether or not to stay in school, here or elsewhere. I know that in my head, but God, it's hard not to feel that if she fails, it's all my fault. The stakes for her are so high. I think the lure of the hero narrative is apparent here: if only I could make everything all right, she would be "saved." But I can't make everything all right. I don't have that kind of power.

Besides, even if some degree of that type of power was possible, would I really want

it? It seems to me that the type of teacher who could “make everything all right” would be a banker-teacher, someone I don’t want to be. I’d be the type of teacher who manipulates students into taking certain actions. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire writes, “The teacher cannot think for [her] students, nor can [she] impose [her] thought on them” (58). I’d add: The teacher cannot save her students, nor can she force them to save themselves. I can’t “save” my student and “keep her” in school anymore than I can force her to drop out, no matter what the hero narrative suggests.

John: Your identification of your intentions toward your student with banking and with the hero narrative hit home for me, Sara. It looks like you did script a conclusion for her (or perhaps were being manipulated into the one she scripted for you) that you were prepared to make a reality. I’m still in awe of your sensitivity toward shit and how the more we used rhetoric about shit to discuss your situation the more emotional and more righteous your intervention seemed. But I’m also seeing your script more critically now in light of the terms you suggest. I’m thinking about Elayne Rapping’s critique of local news programs, how news teams will oftentimes intervene in an individual’s life—get a sewer pipe fixed for an elderly

“It’s even hard to say if your view of the fix was really the right fix at all, given all the potential damage—the risk to your well being and career, among other possibilities.”

man or get food in the mouth of a homeless woman—as a way of convincing people that the system works, that repairs to those elements that falter are forthcoming. In other words, this is ultimately a conservative venture—no real changes take place in the system that delayed reparations to the sewer pipe or allowed homelessness. Your initial impulse to fix things might be seen in the same way: maybe as a commercial for the feasibility of radical intervention. I think rescues are often necessary (I don’t underestimate the value of a meal to a homeless person, and I agree that you need to address your student’s ordeal somehow), but we’ve got to keep our eyes on big changes as well.

Your immediate fix to your student’s case would have left all of the same threatening forces in place—her boyfriend could still threaten both of you, for example. It’s even hard to say if your view of the fix was really the right fix at all, given all the potential damage—the risk to your well being and career, among other possibilities. Hero narratives don’t allow you room to consider all of this—they focus on the “successful conclusion,” kick all the shit to the side.

Whatever could have happened or still might happen, though, I think you've resisted the lure of the hero narrative in a productive fashion. You've chosen instead to look at all the shit you've stepped into (and once you abandon the tried and true of the standard curriculum, once you step out of the cover of shit, you are sure to step into it), you've discerned multiple sources of it, and you are considering what to do with it to become empowered, critical, and more humane.

Rick: I'd like to comment on some of the psychological shit relating to Sara's experiences with her student—psychological shit that seems to be a recurring theme: fixing shit, getting involved/not getting involved in other people's shit, and “professional distance.” I remember as a child seeing my grandmother work so hard and knowing the difficulties of her life. My goal as a little boy was to grow up and become a doctor (my grandmother always said that because she worked in a nursing home that I should grow up and be a doctor—it was sort of a little fantasy game we had going). If I grew up to be a doctor, I'd be able to help people, including my grandmother. I could fix things for her so she wouldn't have to work so hard again. Of course, that never happened. I always helped my grandmother, but I was no more capable of fixing her life than she was. But I grew up wanting to fix things, go the extra nine yards and do things for people that other people would never consider doing. I got involved in some people's lives. Occasionally some good things happened, but more often than not, nothing was fixed, and I ended up emotionally hurt (god, the emotional pains of being working class, particularly if there's not a strong family network, which in my case, there wasn't). Being poor, I tried to “gain entry” (and for me, then, gaining entry was just being accepted and loved. Really didn't have anything to do with status or money) by taking care of things and people—showing my loyalty. Was I full of shit or what?

By the time I was older and working as a respiratory therapist in the hospital, I had learned the meaning of “professional distance.” I was so overwhelmed by all of the sick patients I dealt with. Most of them were terminal, in ICU or CCU. I always tried to be a good therapist and to be an advocate for the patient. But to get involved in their shit beyond the bounds of my field was too much for me. I couldn't handle it.

So when Sara questioned whether to give her student “a few phone numbers and wish her good luck,” the way most “professionals” would do, or to take an active role, I thought, you're so right. In the back of my mind I wondered about the implications of it all, but I tried to downplay all of that because I felt like a traitor or a “petty professional.” Of course now, after hearing what MaryAnn said (definitely a voice of reason and wisdom), I realize now what that “professional distance” means. As Sara mentions, to be rigid about the due dates for assignments and not work with her student at all is pretty cold and unfeeling—definitely a petty professional. But to get too involved in trying to fix someone's shit only

seems to sink another person deep in shit. Deep shit, as John said. So what does it mean to want to fix things? How can we as educators go farther than our banking colleagues in helping our students without getting too mired in shit? And how do we as working-class folks, women, etc. achieve solidarity with other working-class folks without getting too deep into fixing everything in their lives?

I tried to fix things for my grandmother until 1994 when she died. And yet—when she died, although it was never stated explicitly, I had the feeling that I hadn't done enough. I'd concentrated on my own life and happiness too much and not grandma's. I didn't become a doctor, and I couldn't fix it. Are there any answers here?

Sara: Rick, you bring up a really interesting point that I hadn't thought about in this way before. I, too, have always had this desire to "fix things" for people; when people ask me why I teach, I usually respond with, "I enjoy helping students," and I do. I enjoy watching students' transformation over the first year of college. I like seeing them grow as writers, and it makes me feel good to know that my teaching played a role in that growth. But, I do think part of it goes beyond the desire to "help" and instead becomes the desire to "fix."

I'd always thought this feeling came from my socialization as a woman. As women, we're taught to be caretakers; in my family in particular this is the case. I've watched my mom put everyone else's needs before her own my whole life, and it's hard not to absorb the notion that somehow, that's what it means to be a woman and a mother. I've always related this tendency to being a woman, but I've never thought of it in terms of class. Frankly, I never knew there were men out there that felt similar kinds of pressures.

After reading your post, Rick, I'm thinking my desire to fix is class *and* gender-related. Perhaps it's a way of gaining control in a world where we don't have much control, as fixing a few things gives us the illusion that we have more power than we do. When you grow up not feeling very powerful, feeling that you're just getting stepped on time and time again, the idea that somehow you can stop shit from happening to other people is very tempting. On one level, we can stop it: we can fight against classism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and all the other evils out there. But on another, more personal level, we can't stop it. We can't stop students from making bad choices about school and their personal lives. We can't rush in and "fix" the repercussions of those bad choices. I think my experience with this student shows we'll only give ourselves and our students shit if we try to "fix" their problems.

John: I identified a lot with Rick's reaction to Sara's story. I've got to admit I was sucked into the hero narrative. I couldn't believe that Sara was taking the risks she was, that her compassion was compelling her to hop in a car with a student whose career was in jeopardy and to take on so much shit head on. Your critical commentaries about "fixing" things and your paralleling these heroics to banking really make me look at the situation differently.

One particular way I've looked at it differently, especially in light of MaryAnn's reaction, is to come to terms with the ways I, in my initial responses to what Sara was telling us, evaded the issues MaryAnn brought up in favor of the hero narrative I saw developing. I commented on Sara's actions, expressed my appreciation for her risks, for the love she was showing her student, for the courage and wisdom she showed in her willingness to take on the shit surrounding her student's pregnancy. But I stood short of endorsing Sara's actions. I know I was protecting myself. I wonder now if I have developed some sort of shit barometer, so to speak, that tells me just what kind of shit I'm willing to take on, challenge, and how much shit I'm willing to take. I don't think this is necessarily a bad barometer to have in my head—but now that I'm in touch with it, I've got to be willing to interrogate it. In some situations, probably in this one, my shit barometer was blocking me from helping Sara sort out this problem, examine her options. I was cheering on the sideline all the while I was protecting my own ass from shit. If I'm going to practice a critical pedagogy, I've got to be suspicious of such moments. As we're learning, there's much more to taking no shit than leaping into it (or watching others do it for you).

5. Getting Your Shit Together

Sara: I had “the talk” with my student after class on Wednesday. I explained to her how I could be held liable if anything would happen to her, and I told her how much I'd been affected emotionally by trying to deal with all of this. I told her that as her teacher, I could only go so far down this road with her, and I'd gone as far as I could go.

We did, however, talk a bit about how she could tell her mother. We also talked about her feelings of letting her mother down. Letting her mother down was her greatest fear, the thing she kept stating over and over again. I told her that fact wasn't going to change—she's still going to be here next year. Pregnancy and/or an abortion won't change that. She seemed to have a fear that the university would take away her scholarships if her pregnancy was discovered. I stressed to her that no matter what she did—continue with the pregnancy or terminate the pregnancy—it was none of the university's business, and even if she screamed the news from the rooftops, the university couldn't revoke her financial aid. Once that information sank in, she was really relieved.

Before she left my office, I did two things: I gave her the number for the campus therapy center, and we worked out a plan to give her an incomplete in my class. She needs to talk to someone who is trained to listen; I can't be everything to her, and I think that's what she wanted me to be these past weeks. She needs a support system, not just a support person.

This may sound petty, but I've been sleeping a lot better since we had this conversation. I know I did the right thing by re-establishing some distance between us. I think I

went too far in the other direction and lost sight of the fact that while I had certain responsibilities to my student, I also had responsibilities to myself. And, I think I lost track of what my responsibilities to her really were—informing her of resources, showing her how to acquire information in order to make informed choices, not “fixing” things for her. “Fixing” isn’t critical pedagogy—it’s banking at its worst because it feeds into all of the hero narratives we’ve discussed in class.

Rick: It’s funny as to how we tailor our shit for the audience: John and I didn’t want to give you shit for helping your student, perhaps because we would have felt like shit in doing so, so our textual comments to the “audience” were positive. When you were first having doubts about your role with your student, you didn’t include that as part of the “text” because you didn’t want to look like a “shit-giving teacher” to the audience. And yet as each of us critically examined ourselves, we altered our text and included different/additional information for the audience as part of the dialogue. That seems about as dialectical as you can get. One of us comes to a realization concerning some issue related to the/our shit, and the others in turn analyze their shit in light of that revelation. In this sense, I certainly don’t see shit as pejorative, but very much dialectic.

As our dialogue reveals, shit is bounced around, interpreted, reinterpreted, and subject to further investigation. What appears as truth in one phase of the dialectical inquiry is rendered false in the next. Thus, our truths appear not as truths at all, or at least not absolute truths. Rather, our truths appear as threads, links, vertical and horizontal lines, dots, dashes, dust. Things come into being, change, and pass out of being not as separate, individual units, but in essential relation and interconnection. Therefore, they cannot be understood as separate but only in terms of their relation and interconnection. As we’ve seen in our dialogue, we’re interrelated in the forces of shit. So what power do we really have as individuals over the directional force of shit?

Shit positions us and reshapes us, and as soon as we think it’s us that makes a deci-

“our truths appear as threads, links, vertical and horizontal lines, dots, dashes, dust. Things come into being, change, and pass out of being not as separate, individual units, but in essential relation and interconnection.”

sion, a choice, or exerts control over our own actions, we need only to look aside and observe the shit that shapes our struggles, positions us, and develops us, and potentially determines our thoughts and actions. So where are our truths? How do we see the truth behind shit that is constantly breaking down and reforming, producing quantitative and qualitative changes? What is our role as academics who attempt to form truths? Do we see truths or constant motion—dialectical motion that passes through stages like a pot of boiling water?

Sara: How about truths AS constant motion?

John: In the context of our studies of the history of rhetoric, you two make me wonder whether there might be a kind of transcendence implied in “shit.” I mean, the realities of factory closings and the personal turmoil that Sara’s student is entering surely mark the deep shit of material reality. But when we decide to call it shit, do we also suggest a world where there is no shit? Calling something “shit,” in other words, can imply hope for a better day, can draw cages around all the clumps of shit we face every day. In this sense, is shit operating critically? On one hand I can see where it can represent a critical view—it dumps on current situations; on the other hand, unless we talk about ways to contend with it, we’re just resting passively on nostalgic hopes that some sort of non-shit state will (again?) gain prominence.

Still, on the other hand (I think this would be my third hand), “shit” can mean essence—not a metaphysical essence but a place, a third space, perhaps, where it’s all at, where it’s all possible. Rick, your description of truth reminds me of Homi Bhabha’s “third space,” which, he says, “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew . . . [It is] the precondition for the articulation of cultural difference . . . It is in this space that we will find those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others” (208-209). When we get to something that says what we mean, when we find ourselves connecting, or even disconnecting, changing, that’s the shit.

Rick: This “third space” that Bhabha discusses relieves us of the dualism inherent in Western metaphysics, in which an “Original cause” exists. I don’t think in terms of a time to which we return when there was no shit. I think the way shit operates culturally also implies “good” shit. And whatever is conceived as good shit is conceived in such a way by and for specific cultures or persons in which this particular shit passes for good. Same with us, same with Sara’s student. Our shit differs, intersects, and varies. Shit is good or bad depending on what it is or who it affects.

Our roles as working-class academics are shaped within a different/same sphere of production than the one Marx wrote about. Marx identified a moment in which it might have been possible for the working class to affect revolutionary social change. With the theory of

the dissolution of the capitalist state evolving into communism, Marx was positioned and located in a moment that appeared ripe for revolution and emancipation. The shit was ready to hit the fan! But our moment occurs where the expansion of capitalism positions us differently, changes our cultures and ideologies, and yet also creates new conditions for resistance—or this Third Space to which Bhabha refers. It's anybody's guess as to how the shit will be stirred in such a space, as different cultures intersect, as capitalist technology and expansion re-territorializes peoples and cultures, imposing its values and technology. Both as an academic and a worker, I've remained convinced of the usefulness of Marxist methodology and dialectic materialism, or as Lukas defines it, a "materialist dialectic" that is the "road to truth" and "can be developed, expanded and deepened only along the lines laid down by its founders" (1-2). It's open to criticism, puts theory into practice, but also relies on essentialism and universals ("truth" in method, "truth" in science)—and, as Edward Said demonstrates, dialectic materialism itself is a *Western* philosophy that often clashes with the values of the masses in the East. I still hold Marxist philosophy as a valuable component of my own beliefs. Capitalism will always create antagonism between abstract notions of capital and "real" human beings who constitute labor in some form or another. But I'm also looking at theoretical "truths," in much the same way Barry Allen does, that pass for truth at a particular moment only to be disregarded in the next (4). Shit is uncertainty, and for now, it seems that uncertainty characterizes the shit that's brewing in the Third Space . . .

6. Whose Shit Is This?

Sara: Endings are always difficult. I'm always a little sad at the end of a term—after spending so much time with students and getting to know so much about them through their writing, suddenly, they're gone. We may never even see each other again. Ending this dialogue is hard, too.

I saw the student I wrote about on our listserv once after that term ended, and fortunately, her story had a "happy ending." She went home and told her mother about her pregnancy, and her mother was extremely supportive. Apparently, her immediate reaction was, "You're not dropping out of school," and she went with her daughter to an abortion clinic. My student also broke up with the boyfriend and turned in all of her work on time; in fact, she even made the Dean's List for that semester. While I was definitely happy for my student, I feel a little uncomfortable with ending this story here, with the good news about my student's academic success. As we discussed on our listserv, I'm afraid this could be read as some sort of hero narrative, which it's definitely not.

Yet I'm also troubled about ending this dialogue here due to the kind of moralizing we got into toward the end of this piece. One of our reviewers noted that it sounded as if we were

devaluing my emotional labor on behalf of this student, and I have to say, I think that is an accurate assessment. At the time of our listserv exchanges, I was a young graduate student and T.A. struggling with how to develop a feminist, critical pedagogy. Given my training as a high school English teacher, I was steeped in the tradition of teaching the “whole student,” giving care not only to students’ academic development, but also their social and emotional development as well. I was acutely aware of the ways in which that care is gendered, however, as it draws on traditional notions of mothering and can reinforce social norms for women. Reading work by Susan Miller and Eileen Schell made me question further the “ethic of care” (to use Schell’s phrase) that dominated my teaching philosophy and practices.

Thus, when I started to feel that I was up to my ears in shit with my student, it was all too easy for me to discount the labor of caring. I plugged that experience into the scripts I was learning as a graduate student: I had allowed myself to get sucked into the hero narrative; I was aiding women’s oppression by practicing a feminist, critical pedagogy based on an ethic of care. I thought I was theoretically and pedagogically naïve—one of the most cutting criticisms an academic can give or receive.

Looking back on this experience now, as a new PhD and assistant professor, I still think I was theoretically and pedagogically naïve, but not for the reasons I articulated above. My naïveté evidenced itself in the ways in which I analyzed this experience, by being so quick to undermine my emotional labor and to force myself into particular scripts that circulate in our field. At the time, it seemed to me that I had to abandon the ethic of care in order to be a “good enough” feminist, critical teacher—a misreading of the scholarship, to be sure, but one that strikes me as typical of graduate students early in their schooling. I established for myself a binary that situated feminist and critical pedagogies on one side (the “good” side), with pedagogies of care on the other.

During the years since this exchange, I’ve learned—and am still learning—how to complicate these scripts and move beyond the reductive binaries I fell into here. I think part of this learning was rooted in my becoming a mother three years ago. After my daughter was born, I reflected more earnestly on women’s work and the devaluation of the caring labor women perform not only as mothers, but also in their work outside the home. This devaluation was even more troubling to me because I felt it coming not only from the dominant culture—where I fully expected it—but also from feminists in the academy. I again began to feel somehow “less” feminist because I esteemed and even enjoyed the labor I did for my daughter. As I struggled with these feelings, I was reminded of my work with this student and the ways in which I undermined and discounted that emotional labor as well. I began to question just how “feminist” or “critical” it was of me—or anyone—to devalue this work that is so often gendered as female. While we can and certainly should critique the ways in which women’s

roles are circumscribed, we must also be careful not to reinforce traditional “women’s work,” such as the labor I did with this student, as somehow necessarily “less than”: less theoretical-ly and pedagogically aware, less valuable, and less worthy.

So I’m left wondering if there are ways after all to value and represent the type of emotional labor that my student and I went through here without uncritically reproducing gender norms. I question if what I worked through here really was self-serving hero bullshit alone, or if other shit was mixed in: about gender, about traditional roles, about women’s work. Were the three of us on the listserv all sucked into the same narratives in the same way, to the same degree, to the same aim? Who, in the end, was slinging the shit?

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Jane E. Falk

Shaped by Resistance: Work as a Topical Theme for the Composition Classroom

FOR THE PAST FOUR YEARS I HAVE TAUGHT THE TWO-COURSE SEQUENCE OF COMPOSITION at The University of Akron, a state university in Akron, Ohio, with a population of about 22,000 students and an open admission policy. More importantly, Akron is a school where most undergraduate students live at home and commute from the surrounding tri-county area and where many students hold down full or part-time jobs. Formerly known as the Rubber Capital of the World, Akron is now home to only one of the Big Four rubber companies, Goodyear. Firestone, General Tire, and Goodrich have all been bought out, moving operations to the south. According to Love and Giffels' *Wheels of Fortune*, a history of the city, Akron produced 40% of the nation's tires in 1930, but by 1983 tire building here had almost completely stopped (xiv). With the exodus of manufacturing, the power of unions to support the working class diminished. As of today, the service industry of hospitals and schools dominates Akron's economy.

Having previously taught at The Ohio State University, the flagship school for Ohio where fewer students hold down jobs while going to school, I realized the need to consider this new kind of student population when developing essay prompts for first-year composition. I began to investigate ways I could incorporate work as a topical theme into my syllabus, believing that such a theme could encourage critical thinking, despite student resistance. This essay tracks the dialectic of my experience in creating meaningful assignments, which enable students to critically consider their relationship to work.

Formal and informal surveys support work as a significant factor in the daily lives of University of Akron students. Since 2002, the university has begun administering the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) to freshmen and seniors. One of the questions on the survey looks at how issues of work affect school performance; results show that the typical freshman student at Akron spends slightly more time studying for all classes than working and about the same amount of time relaxing as working or studying. This may mean that certain courses or certain types of course preparation receive more or less attention than others.

When I informally polled my own students recently (four classes of freshmen taking

English Composition 112, the second in a two-course sequence), their responses showed that most students work either full- or part-time. Only a few students, mainly athletes or postsecondary students, did not. Of those who work, most hold down part-time positions from 10-20 hours a week, although some work more than 20 hours a week or have two part-time jobs. In addition, most work off campus, involving even more time spent commuting to and from the job site. However, these types of jobs allow students to make more money than typical campus positions, which may start students at minimum wage.

Students also volunteered the information that in order to work and have some time for relaxation, certain types of school assignments don't get done. Those assignments usually involve preparation for daily class activities of a non-crucial or non-graded nature such as reading. From my perspective, the outcome is that many students do not come to class prepared. However, it would appear from these findings that the topic of work and issues having to do with work in American society might be of interest to University of Akron students. At the very least, students would have some built-in expertise in this topic hypothetically enabling them to write and speak with authority and expertise.¹

Educator Ira Shor has long advocated using topics such as work in the composition classroom that are relevant to students' daily lives.² An early statement on this approach appears in his 1980 work, *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, where an empowering pedagogy can build on "the many strengths, skills and knowledges students themselves bring to class" (82). He suggests language projects that operate as "experiential and conceptual . . . connect[ing] a field of particular experience to general meaning" as a way to strive toward such a pedagogy. He further describes such projects as achieving "the magic of orienting students towards their reality by detaching them from it" (204). He considers work a "dynamic theme for class study" (127), one which can "merge popular experience with awareness"

1. It is interesting to consider that in 1993 a member of the University of Akron faculty, Janet Marting, created a composition text with a focus on work for her students, *Making a Living: A Real World Reader*. In a recent email, she noted her "original impetus" for creating the text book in developing an honors composition course: "I wanted to focus on a theme that would interest and be challenging to students. Because most students have summer jobs and many work part-time during the school year, I figured they'd have ample interest in and things to say about this topic."

2. A number of other studies have more recently appeared bringing Shor's emphasis on work as a topic for student discussion and composition into the new millennium. Several notable examples are James Zebroski's *Thinking Through Theory*, 1994, which uses work as a topic for an ethnographic approach to the research paper; Bruce McComiskey's *Teaching Composition as a Social Process*, 2000, which considers work a social theme to let students "see that their writing can influence the status quo" (24); Derek Owens' *Composition and Sustainability*, 2001, which, similarly to Shor, considers work a topic that students have experience with and can productively reflect on; and David Seitz's *Who Can Afford Critical Consciousness?*, 2004, which considers work a useful topic to encourage critical thinking in students.

(128). This in turn makes classroom activity relevant and the purpose of school more meaningful. Shor's purpose, as expressed in his later text, *Empowering Education*, is to enable students, to "situate curriculum in issues and language" from their life experience. Work is one such "generative theme," expressing "problematic conditions in daily life that are useful for generating class discussion" (55). For Shor, such themes can encourage critical thinking,

"many of whom believe in the capitalist system and bank on their college education to make them rich"

which will ultimately result in student empowerment and the possibility for students to change their attitudes toward the system and their lives for the better.

However, this goal seems problematic for University of Akron freshmen, many of whom believe in the capitalist system and bank on their college education to make them rich or at least give them the opportunity to lead better lives than their parents. This may be compounded by the

fact that many students come from working-class backgrounds and count on college to raise their class and economic status. These factors contribute to student resistance to critiques of work and of corporate culture and add to a lack of interest in this topic.

In addition, my students may have conflicted attitudes toward work and upward mobility as a topic, attitudes that coincide with points Janet Bean makes in her essay on University of Akron students, "Manufacturing Emotions: Tactical Resistance in the Narratives of Working-Class Students." She specifically addresses the attitudes of upwardly mobile students and resistance to issues of work in relation to their working-class backgrounds: "My students believe in hard work and merit-based rewards . . . The experience of witnessing their parents' pain creates an ethic of obligation and gratitude, however that complicates the motive of upward social mobility." She concludes, "For these students what drives them to success is not simply a desire to move upward; instead, they are striving for work that will prevent them from repeating their parents' life of pain" (108). She also notes the plight of upwardly mobile young men who must go against the "deeply rooted identities" of their working class backgrounds (109).³

3. Note that David Seitz in *Who Can Afford Critical Consciousness?* also makes some similar observations on the attitudes of working-class male students toward the work of composition, as well as astute observations about student resistance in general. However, in relation to working-class students in general, Carolyn Boiarsky et al. make the point in the essay, "Working-Class Students in the Academy," that "it is impossible to perceive this class as a single, monolithic group" (19).

Aside from students' backgrounds, The University of Akron's summer reading program for incoming freshmen also influenced my choice of work as a topical theme. According to a memo from the University's provost, the purpose of this program is "to provide new students with a common experience from which to draw during the fall semester" (Stroble). Three of the featured texts over the past four years have addressed issues relating to work in American society: Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*, an investigation into the lifestyles of minimum wage workers in today's society; Yvonne Thornton's *The Ditchdigger's Daughters*, an African-American family's success story in which all family members (adults and children) work hard so that all five children have the opportunity for a college education; and *Gum-Dipped* by Joyce Dyer, a memoir about growing up in Akron with close family ties to the rubber industry.

Dyer's *Gum-Dipped* has been the most relevant text thus far to the life experiences of Akron students, many of whose relatives worked in or are still connected with the rubber industry. Dyer describes her father's plight as an employee at Firestone who earned a management position through hard work only to be demoted to janitorial duties because he did not have a college degree. His downward spiral reflected the economic fate of Akron itself. The text, echoing many students' family experience, consequently challenged their positive notions about corporate America doing right by its workers. In fact, two of the three summer selections present primarily negative aspects of work, and all emphasize the hardships of working-class citizens, perhaps indirectly promoting the value and necessity of a college education for incoming students.

Fulfilling my obligation to the summer reading program involved incorporating these texts into my syllabus, minimally as extra reading material and discussion, but optimally as a basis for paper assignments and group projects. Considering Akron's predominantly working-class student body led me to incorporate the texts as much as possible into my syllabus with both a discussion and composition component. I began by focusing on the issue of work for one of the semester's required papers. Over the four years that I have been developing and expanding this theme of work, albeit in response to student resistance to this topic, the assignment has evolved so as to help students more deeply contextualize their work experiences. Ultimately, I found that the use of various texts in conjunction with personal experience encourages students to understand critically their own and their families' labor in relation to corporate America's present practices in a globalized and downsized economy. However, I started that first year with an assignment based primarily in narrative.

The first paper's prompt asked students to write about a memorable work experience, either good or bad, and to consider how it may have affected their attitude toward work both in the past and present. I required that they use Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*

as background and a model for their stories. Since many students had had the kind of low-paying, lower-level jobs that she described, it was fairly easy for them to relate to the prompt. In addition, I had used peer groups to role play the different kinds of job experiences that Ehrenreich had investigated to help students imagine how they might dramatize this book for a television documentary. This proved a challenging group project but one that also enabled students to come up with work memories for their personal narratives. However, although many students were able to vividly tell stories about the negative experiences they had had in the work world with unfair pay, mistreatment by bosses, or dangerous situations, emotional narratives predominated with often only the concluding paragraph left to describe the significance of the experience. This was due to a lack of foresight on my part and a too simplistically phrased prompt. In this case, student resistance was directed primarily to Ehrenreich herself, whom students saw as an impostor in the world of the working class. Her research was carried out undercover, as she impersonated a working-class maid, waitress, and sales associate, and students responded to what they perceived to be her middle-class condescension.

In an attempt to move from a focus on personal narrative to one on analysis and critical thought, the second year I asked students to consider work-related issues that were important to them in relation to achieving the American Dream, using *The Ditchdigger's Daughters* as basis. This memoir, supposedly a model of the American success story, showed the rise of a working-class family in the 1950s. Many student papers commented on the changing nature of the American Dream and work ethic, believing society now devalued hard work and physical labor; they focused their critique against what they thought was a new work ethic. Students found examples of this new work ethic especially evident in the media, where the lives of the rich and famous are featured. One student commented that “the road to success has been altered, from that of hard work and gratification deferred . . . to the idea of ‘get rich quick’ and the belief that gratification deferred is gratification lost.” Students pointed out that in today’s globalized and service-based economy, a family in Akron with all members working at minimum wage, some even working two jobs, couldn’t make enough to send five children to college, as in *Ditchdigger's Daughters*, without incurring huge student debt. Again student resistance here was directed more at the text, which they found boring and outdated, than at the assignment. However, the idea of the American Dream was much more appealing to write about than students’ personal work experience.

The next year with *Gum-Dipped* as the student summer text, I wanted to get students to return to an analysis and critique of work itself by having them include counterarguments about that experience. In keeping with the book’s theme, this paper focused on relations between employer and employee and the responsibilities of corporations and businesses to

workers exemplified by the experience of Dyer's father, of whom Firestone's corporate management took advantage. Perhaps because of the direct connection to life in Akron, this prompt and text proved especially adept at provoking critical thinking. One student wrote about how his father had lost his job due to outsourcing, which he linked to the fact that "companies do not care about their workers anymore." He ended his paper by presenting a solution to this problem. However, the downside of the assignment was that it generated more student resistance in the form of complaints about writing the paper. The greater demands of argument over personal narrative explains part of this resistance, but many students wrote about family members' negative experiences with job loss or downsizing, which made this a depressing paper to write and more likely contributed the bulk of the resistance.

In order to combat resistance, I expanded the text option the next semester to include Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*, a critique of the fast food industry. Since many students have work experience in fast food, I figured they could use this text to comment on their own experience, rather than dwelling on the more emotionally charged experiences of parents or grandparents in the rubber industry. In addition to being more relevant to them personally, the text, while still enabling critical thought, was more upbeat than Dyer's somewhat depressing look at the death of the rubber industry in Akron. One student commented on the problems of "untrained teens," stating that "at the McDonalds I worked for there was never a feeling of unity or safety. No one believed the company was there to help us." The greater ability of students to generate such insights shows the necessity of taking the emotional needs and experiences of students into consideration when picking a text, as well as to let students bring out positive and negative emotions in an effort to understand where they come from and what life situations generated such feelings.

Remembering that students had been interested in media presentations of work, especially in relation to the American Dream and issues of class, I decided for the next semester to have students compare their work experiences with those of characters in a favorite movie or television show. Classes chose which movies they wanted to watch as a group, choosing *Office Space* and *Antz*, among others. One student wrote about her job at a discount store in comparison to the movie *Win a Date with Tad Hamilton* that "movies are often an escape for most people from the drudgery and problems they face in their everyday life As an avid movie watcher, I prefer the glamorized version because just maybe, I will find the type of dream portrayed in the movie." Another student compared her job working at a country club as a food server with *Caddyshack*, stating that "we as a culture, rely on this form of the media to make us feel better about the jokes we secretly dream of playing on our wicked bosses and superiors in order to exact sweet revenge for all of the grief they put their employees through." These were two of many insightful comments that stu-

dents made in response to this prompt. One benefit of letting students choose the movie was that the class had a great deal of enthusiasm before beginning to write the paper. In addition, many students saw how the reality of their working lives compared to the fantasy of work, as presented in the movies and on television, and the commodification of daily life. This countered working-class students' uncritical reliance on upward mobility as the ethos behind their analyses and their resistance to critically thinking through their relationship to corporate America.

As mentioned briefly during my discussion of the first assignment, I supplemented the writing of papers these past four years with collaborative projects using work as a topic. These major assignments had fairly long time frames, approximately from mid-semester on. Students would choose groups according to their type of work experience: physical or manual labor, food service, sales and service, recreational, technical or white collar, etc. The goal of the collaboration was to come up with a common problem encountered by students in the group and to propose a solution, using field research methods of observation, survey, or interview. The groups would present their findings to the class during the last week of the semester, and the groups were graded as a whole. I also required that the groups turn in a brief report to document their oral presentation in writing. These projects had a positive impact on developing critical thinking in students as well as having a synergistic relation with the paper. Since I assigned the paper and project simultaneously, students would finish the paper before the project was due, enabling them to think about their collaborative project as they wrote their papers. In addition, the group work added inspiration to the writing of the paper.

"all wore bags over their heads at the beginning of their presentation to emphasize their job's title, relative anonymity, and low status."

Although many groups simply would have each member speak about their job experience with one student as moderator, some of the group projects ended up being quite creative and thought-provoking. For example, an honors white-collar group all wore business attire, bringing their own computers to a non-computerized classroom to make their power point presentation. Members of a group representing grocery work, specifically the job of bagger, all wore bags over their heads at the beginning of their presentation to emphasize their job's title, relative anonymity, and low status. This group comprised stu-

dents who didn't normally participate or speak up much in class, but who really came alive in the group planning sessions and presentation. A group who did factory work acted out a typical day in their work lives from waking up to punching in to the assembly line with its repetitive motion to punching out and going home exhausted. Another memorable moment involved the research methods used by a group of seven food service workers who put up their multi-colored pie chart printouts of individual survey findings on the board creating a rainbow effect. Thus the group projects were successful in promoting creativity, as well as giving students the opportunity to consider problems relative to their job types and possible solutions to those problems.

Perhaps these collaborative projects were more immediately successful than the essay assignments because the projects dealt with issues directly involving the students. Many of them worked at jobs simultaneously as they researched the project and could do some of the research while working. However, the group project also generated an element of resistance. Issues of ethics came into play with the need to get releases from those they interviewed or surveyed and with the need to discuss with their bosses the fact that they were carrying on research. Some students feared to discuss or expose aspects of their job or even to tell their employers what they were doing, especially if the students thought they might uncover a real problem. This happened specifically with food service workers who presented health risks about their restaurant or grocery jobs to the class. One student solved this dilemma by deciding to report on a fellow worker's job in the store, not his own. In addition, the group project generated some complaints because students dislike receiving a group grade.

Interestingly, resistance to group work itself can be seen as an aspect of labor, a point made by John Trimbur in his essay, "Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning." The first step toward creating a "critical version" of collaborative learning is to "distinguish between consensus as an acculturative practice that reproduces business as usual and consensus as an oppositional one that challenges the prevailing conditions of production." For Trimbur, "the point of collaborative learning is not simply to demystify the authority of knowledge by revealing its social character but to transform the productive apparatus, to change the social character of production" (451).

Collaborative groups generate resistance partly because they require students to consider a different mode of production of the educational product—one produced without traditional student/teacher hierarchy in place. Non-hierarchical work arrangements also run counter to the typical working-class job site with one boss having power and many workers obeying implicitly with little say in their deployment. Students are also used to school's emphasis on individual production and the reassurance that their hard work will be recog-

nized and rewarded by the system. The perceived lack of individuality confuses some students. A compromise position here has been to offer a group grade with an additional individual graded component for each member to ease students into true collaboration.

The group project for my class added an even more difficult aspect for students—its seemingly open-ended nature and the amount of class time I was able to devote to the project. Students had to come up with their own problems and research methods toward a solution, which would cause some chaos in early stages of the meetings. Typically students would take a while to get involved with the project and to figure out a group focus. I tried to give students at least three class periods for these group meetings. If additional meetings were needed outside of class, students would complain about time constraints. In fact, they would resist doing any of the work outside of class, citing their work commitments. For some this was simply an excuse, but for most this was a reality and a way that working-class status and the necessity to work to pay tuition limits class and campus involvement.

Interestingly, I've found that honors classes seem to be least enthusiastic about group work. Perhaps the emphasis on past job experience students have had rather than on future employment aspirations (from the mundane and minimum wage jobs they have been forced by circumstance to take to the more glamorous top wage jobs they envision they will have on graduation) is part of the problem for them. They have generally higher expectations than other students and a stronger work ethic. This was demonstrated in their responses to the movie *Office Space*, which glorified the slacker mentality of the movie's hero, Peter. In a typical response, one student wrote that she had "always worked my hardest at everything I do." In addition, more honors students hold down white-collar or technical jobs during school and seem less interested or inclined to criticize these jobs to which they aspire. One student couldn't or wouldn't write about his negative experiences in telemarketing, resulting in a case of writer's block in relation to freewriting the first draft of his essay. Part of his fear was that eventually someone involved with his job would read the essay, and his words would come back to haunt him.

Contributing to this double bind situation, many of the honors students in the class I taught this past semester (and some of the most vehement protesters of the group project) were from working-class backgrounds and were often the first students in their families to go to college. Thus, their protests may also have stemmed from resistance to dwelling on the kinds of non-professional jobs in their backgrounds or that of their parents, which relates to a point made by bell hooks in her essay, "Confronting Class in the Classroom." Regarding student behavior, hooks writes, "Silencing enforced by bourgeois values is sanctioned in the classroom by everyone" (180). Although hooks here refers to the literal silence of controlled and polite classroom behavior, I extend it to students' self-imposed silence about their work-

ing-class background in front of other students whom they may perceive as being middle or upper class.

In relation to silencing and class, Pierre Bourdieu makes the point in *The Logic of Practice* that “the most successful ideological effects are the ones that have no need of words, but only of *laissez-faire* and complicitous silence” (133). He comes to this conclusion in a discussion of how the established order is legitimized, pointing out that “the system of cultural goods production and the system producing the producers also fulfill ideological functions, as a by-product, through the very logic of their functioning, owing to the fact that the mechanisms through which they contribute to the reproduction of the social order . . . remain hidden” (132-33). Here, he specifically refers to the educational system.

Having students consider how the system silences discussions of class may be useful in overcoming resistance to this issue. One way I have led discussion in this direction is to have students read Gregory Mantsios’ essay, “Media Magic: Making Class Invisible,” which claims that the media privilege the rich and famous and make the poor virtually invisible. In the fall of 2005, we also effectively discussed the media’s presentation of the poor during Hurricane Katrina, a vivid reminder that the poor are still very much part of American life.

In evaluating both of the components of the work unit, I have found that additional activities, such as the Mantsios reading, are needed to optimize critical thinking outcomes. Despite what Ira Shor reports about his own successful use of such relevant, real-life assignments, students don’t seem to want to think about work while in school or school while at work. They have what some of my students have called a “work sucks” attitude.⁴ In addition, as pointed out in discussing the honors classroom, some students also seem less willing or able to critique their jobs or the corporate world in general.

A further strategy I have used to counter student resistance has been to ask students to write a self-reflective journal about the process of writing the work essay. This came about when I noted that many students did better than expected on this essay, despite complaints. Trying to understand this disparity, I created the following journal prompt: “Although some of you claimed that work was a distasteful topic, many of you wrote interesting and meaningful essays. How do you account for this? Did writing this essay enable any critical thinking you would not ordinarily have done?”

Some students responded insightfully; their responses bear sharing. One student noted that work wasn’t so much a distasteful topic as it was a difficult one. Critical thinking was involved because the issues weren’t “in plain sight, they must be interpreted.”

4. However in a 1977 essay, “Reinventing Daily Life: Self-Study and the Theme of ‘Work,’” Shor acknowledges that writing about work generates a kind of double negative situation where two negatives, writing as work and work as theme combine for a truly negative situation or “formula for grief” (502).

Another student made the point that writing about such topics “quite often forces me to think and try harder than I normally would. When writing about something that I like, I don’t try as hard because it seems easier to me.” Another student noted that at first, work seemed like a boring topic, but once she had begun to explore aspects of the topic in

“it was a lot of bad experiences that we didn’t want to bring back up or remember.”

freewrites, she found that she “felt strongly about many of them such as benefits, salary, and safety in the workplace.” This student had experience working in fast food and brought up criticisms from *Fast Food Nation* in relation to safety issues. Another student simply stated that “we had a lot to say about what we disliked about our jobs.” Along those same lines, a

student wrote that because “we experienced work we had a lot to talk about,” reinforcing Shor’s ideas about the benefits of having students write from their own lives. The downside for this student was that “it was a lot of bad experiences that we didn’t want to bring back up or remember.” In relation to such negative memories, several students wrote about work experiences in which parents were laid off or forced to take low-paying jobs by uncaring companies and corporate executives.

Even more significantly, several students indicated that writing about the topic created positive changes in their lives. One African-American student who had written about discrimination against her mother in the work place noted that in writing the paper she realized the importance of this issue for her, mentioning “the big effect discrimination had had on my life as an African-American.” A student who liked his summer job as a roofer and claimed that his experience had led him to write a “meaningful and interesting essay” also recognized that writing the paper forced him to contemplate the job’s dangers; he concluded with ways that he could keep himself and fellow workers safe in the future. Another student who had claimed to dislike the topic and had written a paper critical of unions ended up feeling more empowered to remedy negative issues of fair pay in her job as grocery store check-out worker, issues which had not been addressed or resolved by her union. She noted that writing the paper enabled her “to think in depth about [her] current employment.” As a result, she wrote a letter to the corporate office, and “they answered with fairness If I had never written this paper I may have never worked up the nerve to have my voice heard.” This response was perhaps the most dramatic effect of writing the paper, although other students also noted a feeling of empowerment and self-realization in their responses.

Additionally, I have found that writing on this topic brought a kind of closure for stu-

dents and demonstrated more pros than cons about this rather difficult essay. It also gave students an additional way to look at their reactions to and outcomes for future assignments or topics not of their own choosing. Reading students' self-reflections was also important for me in considering whether to continue to have students write on this topic. Although I have not had students write a self-reflection on the collaborative project, I realize now that that would also have been useful for the students and me.

In general, my experience demonstrates that open-ended, interactive, and creative collaborative projects dealing with the topic of work generate positive outcomes, perhaps because they are often grounded in students' full or part-time jobs. However, the essay, combining personal narrative and argument, despite student resistance, was also able to generate some critical thought, perhaps because students were forced to look at positive and negative aspects of their relation to work. This became more apparent, however, only after I added a self-reflective journal component. My synergistic approach combining individual essays with a group project allows students to move from the personal to the collective sphere gaining energy from each others' experiences.

Writing this paper and reflecting on my experience with work as a topic to encourage students' critical thinking has been, for me, an act of self-reflection on my own pedagogy and values as a compositionist. In the future, I plan on making the final format of work-related assignments a decision guided by students rather than one imposed on them. Inspired by the experience of the student who worked as grocery store checkout clerk, I am considering giving students the option to write a more practical document, a letter to the editor, a letter to their boss, or even a letter to a parent or fellow worker, as a follow-up to the essay or even as an alternative assignment.⁵ I am also considering giving students a choice of issues about work to consider for the group project. Instead of having them focus on a problem they are having in their present job, they may consider the pros and cons of jobs they are preparing for, a topic which may engender more enthusiasm. In this regard, Marting noted in response to my queries regarding her success with *Making a Living* that students were most interested in sections that dealt with "the meaning of work, the work ethic, and personal narratives about work."

Most importantly, what I have learned about developing essay and collaborative group prompts around the topic of work is that one must take student resistance into consideration. This may be more important in an economically depressed area such as Akron; hence, context is also important to consider. Ultimately, I have developed these assignments counter to or in dialogue with student resistance. The process has been a dialectical one and

5. See McComiskey for similar approaches to writing about work.

in accordance with Shor's ideas about student-teacher interaction in the democratic classroom. Is resistance shaped into acceptance here or are both students and teacher changed in the process? Ideally the situation should be that of Paulo Freire's problem-posing education where teacher and students "become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (80). Whatever the specific assignments and issues that students and I will create together focusing on work as a theme, and despite initial resistance to this topic, I believe that the study of students' working lives enables growth, furthers lively discussion and critical thinking about the commodified and class stratified world in which we live, and has present and future relevance for students at The University of Akron.

Note: Thanks to my students for sharing their writing with me and agreeing to let me quote from their work for this paper. Thanks also to William Thelin for giving me initial feedback on this essay.

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library in a country house somewhere in southern England, in about 1910, mauding on about the delights of idleness, country walks, tobacco, old wine, and old books" (Good vii). Nevertheless, the up-to-the-minute *Encyclopedia of the Essay*, which has the latest word (in fact, 973 very large pages of latest words) on the subject, observes that "even if it lives in disguise" or what Elizabeth Hardwick calls "a condition of unexpressed hyphenation: the critical essay, the autobiographical essay, the travel essay, the political" (Hardwick xiii), "the essay seems more alive than ever. . . . Whether it is labeled New Journalism, creative nonfiction, or just nature writing, the American essay has . . . been moving inexorably toward subjects that are at once more intimate and more public than the safe and chatty reveries of the genteel essayists of the late Victorian era. Today the most respected American essayists write uninhibitedly and skillfully about issues as personal as their own addictions . . . and as public as women's liberation and environmental awareness" ("American Essay" 22).

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, the essay canon—the only game in town as an index of an essay's popularity—consists of works by today's most respected essayists that are reprinted time and again in freshman composition readers and used as exemplary models for student writers ("The Essay Canon"). I derived this canon by collecting and analyzing twenty percent of all the readers published in the United States for the past half-century, 1946-96, with ongoing updates. This means every reader published in four or more editions, fifty-eight titles in 325 volumes. These canonical readers contain approximately 21,000 reprintings of some 8,000 different essay titles by 4,246 authors. I've used viability—rather than, say, supreme quality—as the major criterion for determining who the canonical essayists are, those whose works have been reprinted one hundred or more times during this fifty-year span. That only 175 authors have emerged as canonical may seem a surprisingly small number, but it's on par with the theoretical explanation of canon formation in, for example, poetry (see Rasula; Bloom, "Once More" 21-22). The hands-down favorites are George Orwell (1,785 reprints), E.B. White (1340), Joan Didion (1,095), Lewis Thomas (1,020), H.D. Thoreau (900), Virginia Woolf (885), Jonathan Swift (865), Martin Luther King, Jr. (825), James Thurber (790), Mark Twain (715), Annie Dillard (680) and Thomas Jefferson (660). Lest these authors strike contemporary readers as a quaint, slightly anachronistic, assemblage, all are alive and well and living in *The Norton Reader*, 11th edition (2004), the most enduring Reader (published since 1965) and major canon-making textbook; and in many of the *Norton's* numerous rivals. The endurance of these authors over time does not mean that the essay canon (or any other literary canon) is a rigid, unchanging assemblage, just that change at the

canon's central core is glacial, while the peripheral authors who comprise the “nonce” canon spin in and out with much greater rapidity (Harris 113).¹

Even when the essay canon is expanded to include distinguished journalistic pieces by authors such as Russell Baker and H. L. Mencken, and excerpts of illustrious autobiographies by Richard Rodriguez, Maxine Hong Kingston, Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, and Mike Rose—all of whom came from working-class origins—the essay canon itself remains upper to upper-middle class in form, language, and authorial panache, if not always in substance. These canonical authors, like most belletristic (and academic) essayists, are writing for an audience of their intellectual and educational peers, and take their sophistication for granted. Consequently, ideal essay readers are expected to match the authors' wide range of reading, however eclectic and quirky; their world travels (even if by armchair) provide understanding of diverse cultures, histories, and philosophies. Readers are also expected to appreciate the essayists' wit, allusiveness, odd angles of vision, engagement of sensory stimuli of all sorts, and the enjoyment of going along for the pleasure of the ride itself as the essay meanders into engaging byways and scenic overlooks rather than sticking to the superhighway to the main idea. Thus the authors' and anticipated readers' common cultural repertoire, rather than intrinsic difficulty of the ideas or relevance of the topics, serves as the barrier between middle- and working-class readers.

Whether belletristic, journalistic, or more academic, essays are transplanted into readers for a variety of purposes. They can be perused as exemplary models of both form and substance. They can be read as sources of insight or inspiration or philosophies of living; as social, political, or aesthetic analyses; as jumping off points for argument, for reading against one another or against the grain; as vicarious autobiography, immersing readers in realms or problems far beyond their immediate experience. It would be hard for many students—freshmen or more advanced (even graduate students in English)—to successfully imitate these elitist models or even to use their rambling and protean shapes as vehicles for more conventional content. For confident essayists break all the rules and provide inimitably human faces and human voices. They re-create themselves as personae; E.B. White correctly claims that the essayist “can pull on any sort of shirt, be any sort of person, according to his mood or his subject matter”—Proteus incarnate—“philosopher, scold, jester, raconteur, confidant, pundit, devil's advocate, enthusiast” (vii). They write in the first person, which as Thoreau acknowl-

1. Thus Norman Mailer and a number of other white male essayists popular in the 1950s and 60s are out, while pushing open the canon door, in addition to Dave Eggers, Jonathan Franzen, Jon Krakauer, and Scott Russell Sanders, are a variety of women and ethnic essayists, as well as representatives of gay and disability culture—Mark Doty, Louise Erdrich, Anne Fadiman, Atul Gawande, John Hockenberry, Jhumpa Lahiri, Chang-rae Lee, Anna Quindlen, Ntozake Shange, David Sedaris, and Abraham Verghese.

edges right up front in *Walden*, “is always . . . the person that is speaking,” the person any author knows the best (107), someone who uses contractions as well as metaphorical language. Athletes of style and substance, they leap about in time, place and topic instead of marching through Georgia in straight lines, as Adorno says, “co-ordinating elements rather than subordinating them” as argumentative academic writing usually does (169-70). Essayists write, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis says, “on the side, through the interstices, between the pages, on top of the text, constructing gestures of suspicion, writing . . . over the top” (18). Essayists

“often an alien genre
for first-year
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and in style.”

are gamesome and allusive, with whole cultures and world libraries, print and newer media, at their disposal—for reading, reference, quotation, allusion. The belletristic essay, says William H. Gass, “browses among books; it enjoys an idea like a fine wine; it thumbs through things . . . proposing possibilities, reciting opinions” (25). Essayists roam the world, literally and of the imagination, traveling to locations exotic or familiar—the lake, once more. Mun-

dane matters such as whether the essayists will make money (they probably won’t) or schedules (such essays take a long time to jell and are often written according to the essayist’s elastic timetable rather than the publisher’s firm deadline) are irrelevant to the writers’ quest for the novel perspective that tames the exotic and makes familiar strange. Scott Russell Sanders, himself an exemplary practitioner of this elusive art form, summarizes the essay’s *modus operandi* in “The Singular First Person”: the essay “is an arrogant and foolhardy form, this one-man or one-woman circus, which relies on the tricks of anecdote, memory, conjecture, and wit to hold our attention” (31).

Thus belletristic essays are often an alien genre for first-year composition students to read, in substance and in style. Given their wide range of allusions, most of the canonical essays (let alone the more esoteric works that are seldom if ever included in freshman readers) would require a thicket of footnotes to be readily comprehensible to contemporary undergraduates. Consider, for instance, the following references in the first two paragraphs of “Shooting an Elephant” by George Orwell, the most widely reprinted canonical essayist: Moulmein, Lower Burma; a sub-divisional police officer; betel juice; baiting; football field [in Burma]; young Buddhist priests; British colonial imperialism; flogging with bamboos; “the utter silence that is imposed on every Englishman in the East,” the dying British Empire; “the younger empires that are going to supplant it”; “the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to

make my job impossible"; the British Raj; Anglo-Indian (42-43). Orwell himself, writing in 1936 for an educated British audience, would have considered this writing the embodiment of the clarity, brevity, simplicity that he advocates in "Politics and the English Language," as would his readers. But times and culture, politics and the English language change, and today's students require explanations—not just of essays written with Orwellian clarity, but of many more complex works as well.

In the works of many essayists, these aspects of style and allusiveness restrict to well-educated readers the accessibility of the genre that Cristina Kirklighter lauds as highly democratic in her compelling study, *Traversing the Democratic Borders of the Essay*. Therein, she reads the academic writings of Latin American and Latino/a essayists Paulo Freire, Victor Villanueva, and Ruth Behar alongside canonical essayists Montaigne, Bacon, Emerson, and Thoreau to demonstrate how "the essay's elements of self-reflexivity, accessibility, spontaneity, and sincerity . . . offer hope for democratizing academia through the personal essay" (124). Yet these essayists, like their canonical counterparts, are adult professionals writing for an audience of their peers, not students—again, using sophisticated language and a wide range of allusions, as this single sentence from Ruth Behar's *Vulnerable Observer* indicates:

At the same time, I began to understand that I had been drawn to anthropology because I had grown up within three cultures—Jewish (both Ashkenazi and Sephardic), Cuban, and American—and I needed to better connect my own profound sense of displacement with the professional rituals of displacement that are at the heart of anthropology. (21)

Behar takes for granted that readers, presumably well-trained and thoughtful anthropologists, will have some sense of what it means to grow up in Cuban, American, and Jewish cultures; that they will be aware of salient differences between Ashkenazi and Sephardic Judaism; and that, in addition to whatever these cultures may have in common, readers will understand the disparities and points of cultural conflict that contribute to the writer's "profound sense of displacement." Moreover, Behar's readers are also expected to understand the "professional rituals of displacement that are at the heart of anthropology" and be able to compare and contrast these with the causes of the author's sense of cultural displacement.

For all of these reasons, belletristic essays are an elusive genre for first-year college students to attempt, as readers and writers, for neither their life experiences nor education before they enter college prepares them with the freedom, fluidity of style, wide-ranging cultural background, and personal ease with the essay form necessary to read or write with authority in this belletristic genre. Belletristic essays are not part of the customary writing repertoire in American high schools, particularly in curricula dominated by five-paragraph themes and driven by the "teach to the test" nationwide impetus of mandated mastery tests

under “No Child Left Behind” legislation. Belletristic essays are very hard to write, as anyone knows who’s ever tried it, for they are not amenable to rules, formulas, prescribed formats; the drum they march to is the distinctive beat of the essayist’s heart. These difficulties, present for readers and writers alike, don’t mean students shouldn’t have to deal with belletristic or more conventional academic essays—just that they’ll have to work to move easily in and among them, whether reading with or against the texts; using them as stimuli for debates, projects in or out of class or in the larger community; imitating their form or style; or debating their subjects.

The Elitism of Discussions of Class in the Academy

Like belletristic essays, discussions of class in the academy are elitist in form and language, if not in substance. As recently as 1998, Patricia Sullivan observed, reaffirming Paul Fussell’s 1982 social analysis in “Notes on Class,” class “is America’s dirty little secret. Sex has nothing on class in America: We are far less squeamish talking and hearing about ‘the act’ than we are about class,” in the academy as throughout the culture. “Class,” she continues, “almost never appears in the disciplined, sanctioned discourses of the academy but as that category of social analysis ‘studied’ by sociologists. When class is spoken of at all, it hitches itself to gender and race, [and] is subdivided into the familiar triumvirate of income, education and occupation . . .” (239).

In the past decade, the taboo identified by Fussell has largely been overcome. Discussions of working-class faculty origins and working-class students have burgeoned recently, most of these written in standard English (if not academese) by academics for other academics. Reinforcing Sullivan’s observations, most exhibit great sensitivity to and understanding of their working-class subjects, and often anger at the economic inequities fundamental to class distinctions. For instance, in “Stupid Rich Bastards,” Laurel Johnson Black recounts the masterplot, “a very simple one: a young woman goes from poverty to the middle class using education to move closer and closer to the stupid rich bastards she has heard about all her life. She finds ever larger contexts into which she can place everything, can get perspective . . . Until someone says ‘Fuck you!’ and it all collapses” (14). As the family member designated to go to college and earn the money that would be her family’s salvation, she would thereby be empowered to give “the stupid rich bastards what they had coming to them.” She would “speak like them but wouldn’t be one of them” (17).

Black eloquently expresses the conflict inherent in the lives and loyalties of working-class faculty, whose positions as college teachers and researchers remove them from the working-class origins that are often the subjects of their academic work: “I cannot move among the rich, the condescending, the ones who can turn me into an object of study with a

glance or word, cannot speak like them, live in a house like them, learn their ways, and share them with my family without being disloyal to someone. I thought learning would make it easier for me to protect and defend my family, myself, but the more I learn the harder it is to passionately defend anything" (25). Black's stance, attitude—and adherence to the conventions of Standard English—are representative of the twenty-four essays in *This Fine Place So Far From Home* (1995), though some substitute academic jargon for Black's elegant eloquence (Pelz; Piper). The twenty-one more-or-less personal essays in Shepard, McMillan, and Tate's *Coming to Class: Pedagogy and the Social Class of Teachers* (1998), while focusing on pedagogy as much as on class, do so in conventional academic language and article formats. Although Kirklighter, in *Traversing the Democratic Borders of the Essay* (2002), argues for more democratic, essayistic writing in the academy rather than the "detached form of academic mimicry" that prevails and stultifies minority students in particular (129), her argument—derived from her 1999 dissertation—follows academic form, language, and conventions.

Likewise, even Patricia Shelley Fox's "Women in Mind: The Culture of First-Year English and the Nontraditional Returning Woman Student" is written in conventional academic form and language, though she is defending, with nontraditional students' autobiographical writings (all depicting working-class experiences), the obligation of first-year English courses to allow students to "work within and among the competing discourses in their lives to offer us an oppositional world view" (202). In fact, Fox is also mounting an argument for the efficacy of personal writing in academia. She intends to solve the problems Gerald Graff identifies in "The Academic Language Gap" when he argues,

Some . . . current educational progressives go so far as to maintain that the primacy of argumentation in composition classes is a form of repression, from which students are to be liberated so they can discover their own authentic voices. This attack on argumentation—which does not hesitate to avail itself of aggressive argumentation to make its points—has led some "expressivist" composition theorists to try to shift the emphasis in writing instruction from exposition, analysis, and the thesis-driven essay to creative self-expression and personal narrative. . . .

. . . Though these views often present themselves as "highly transgressive," their effect ultimately reinforces the old genteel assumption that advanced literacy is for the few—as it can only continue to be if students are deprived of the argumentative skills needed to succeed. (27)

Even though some authors (such as Fox) advocate that their students write personal essays, only one of the works about pedagogues and pedagogy identified here recommends particular essays, working-class or otherwise, for classroom use. The exception is Kirklighter's article on "The Relevance of Paulo Freire on Liberatory Dialogue and Writing in the Classroom."

There she recounts teaching successes with essays by Patrick Welsh (from *Tales Out of School*) and chapters of Patricia Williams's *The Alchemy of Race and Rights*, which are often reprinted in textbooks as free-standing essays. Sections of other autobiographical works written with a class orientation, such as Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, are also reprinted as essays (viz Wright's "The Library Card," alternatively titled "The Power of Books," and Rose's "I Just Wanna Be Average," all titles supplied by the textbook editors). In general, pedagogical articles addressing class never mention essays in the same breath. When referring to student writing—either composing processes or products—they generally emphasize the topics and perhaps attitudes engendered by the readings, but seldom the written forms in which the students are expected to respond to them.

Freshman Composition: A Middle-Class Enterprise Built on Elitist Readings

The academy has—and perpetuates—high-brow taste, in music, cinema, and literature, including drama (no soaps), poetry (no verse or jingles—and limericks only sub rosa), quality fiction² and other classics—actual or potential—of all sorts. Thus it is not surprising that a preponderance of freshman English programs continue to use elitist essays, many of which constitute the essay canon, as they have done for some 125 years (see Brereton, *passim*; Connors). Despite the acknowledged difficulties in teaching students to write belletristic essays, these materials retain vigor as models for student discussion, if not emulation. Indeed, personal essays and excerpts of autobiographies treated as essays provide expert witness for many of the political agendas and theoretical orientations that underlie the first-year curriculum. Thus these readings support agendas oriented to issues feminist (Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Gloria Steinem); multicultural (James Baldwin, Linda Hogan, Gary Soto, Judith Ortiz Cofer); queer (Paul Monette, Kate Millett); post-colonial (Edward Said, Jamaica Kincaid, Paule Marshall); or disability (Brenda Bruegemann, Georgina Kleege, Andre

"generally emphasize the topics and perhaps attitudes engendered by the readings, but seldom the written forms in which the students are expected to respond to them."

2. High quality fiction dominates undergraduate literary curricula, despite the occasional genre courses devoted to science fiction, mysteries, or comic books. As a rule, only more esoteric graduate studies (mostly dissertations) allow examination of popular, formulaic, genre, and pulp fiction.

Dubus); as well as to matters of class (Richard Rodriguez, Mike Rose, Esmerelda Santiago), with which they often overlap. Those working-class authors who never left the working class as a consequence of their education and/or writing (most major authors, such as James Baldwin and Maxine Hong Kingston, changed class though not necessarily class loyalty) and whose work nevertheless become canonical are few; Judy Brady's "I Want a Wife" is the most conspicuous illustration. Other canonical representatives of non-traditional backgrounds,

"the people who read *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, and little magazines—intellectually cultivated, widely read, with sufficient leisure time to read, and enough disposable income to buy books and magazines."

such as Sojourner Truth ("Ain't I a Woman?") and Chief Joseph ("We Will Fight No More Forever"), were actually illiterate. The pieces attributed to them were composed by journalists, and are not included in textbooks to serve as pedagogical models but as token items to raise the readers' awareness of issues of gender, ethnicity, and social and cultural marginality, rather than class.

As explained earlier, the contents of virtually all textbook collections of essays (readers), including discussions of class written by canonical authors, such as George Orwell or Barbara Ehrenreich, are composed in standard English. All of these essays in their original context are intended for a middle-class or academic audience, the people who read *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, and little magazines—intellectually cultivated, widely read, with sufficient leisure time to read, and enough disposable

income to buy books and magazines. If working-class readers encounter essays actually or potentially canonical, it is likely to be in college textbooks, rather than in their publication of origin, since textbooks are the primary places where essays are reprinted and are the source of the canon.

Moreover, the pressure to teach the essays, from the writing programs that adopt the textbooks and from the textbook publishers who respond to the demands of their potential adopters, is to ensure that the essays, however elitist in form, may be understood in terms of middle-class values and experiences, even those that discuss working-class life. Thus, both the

bestselling *Norton Reader* and the *Bedford Reader* include “Aria,” the chapter from Richard Rodriguez’s *Hunger for Memory* that uses his own childhood experience as a native speaker of Spanish, the “private language” of home, to argue against bilingual education: “What I needed to learn in school was that I had the right—and the obligation—to speak the public language of *los gringos*” (*Norton* 9th ed 572). Both Readers ask students to comment on public and private language (“Was there a language in your home that was similarly private? Did you and your family speak a language [or dialect] other than the dominant one . . . ?” (*Bedford* 582)) and to assess Rodriguez’s arguments against bilingual education (“Is he claiming that other non-English speakers would have the same gains and losses as he did? What evidence does he base his case on?” (*Norton* 578)). *The Bedford Reader*, using the essay to reflect on “The Power of Family,” asks additionally for a commentary on childrearing practices: “Rodriguez’s mother and father seem to have had a definite idea of their parental obligations to their children . . . What, for example, is the connection between good parenting and teaching one’s child to conform?” (582). While questions such as these are designed to accommodate a range of responses drawn from the spectrum of the students’ class experiences, it is understood that they will be writing in the lingua franca of the academy, as *The Bedford Reader* implies in asking for an essay “defining the distinctive quality of the language spoken in your home when you were a child . . . Do you revert to this private language when you are with your family?” (582).

Most textbooks are commissioned by the editors of major textbook publishing houses. The authors, usually nationally known for their innovative composition studies research (think Connors, Ede, Lunsford), propose radical books, innovative readings, imaginative pedagogy. Yet their textbooks—and I speak from repeated personal experience (see Bloom, “Making Essay Connections”)—are invariably pushed toward traditional middle-class pedagogy with relatively modest innovations. The publishers’ perceptions of the market, buttressed by surveys of prospective adopters of the books (freshman composition teachers), tend toward cloning of successful books already on the market, which are usually centrist in content, as Kuhn argues in “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.” They contain 50-75% canonical or pre-canonical essays (Bloom, “Making Essay Connections” 141) and are middle class in pedagogy. The textbook author or editor is thus caught in a double bind: to insist on dramatic innovation is to greatly diminish sales; yet to succumb to cloning is to further glut the market already saturated with middle-class values.³

3. The exceptions may be found in the often confrontative, oppositional readings encouraged by the editors of the widely-used *Ways of Reading*, David Bartholomae and Anthony Petroskey, who begin their Introduction with “Reading involves a fair measure of push and shove. You make your mark on a book and it makes its mark on you. Reading is not simply a matter of hanging back and waiting for a piece, or its author, to tell you what the writing has to say . . . We have not mentioned finding information or locating an author’s purpose or identifying main ideas, use-

For the teaching and writing of essays in the academy is by and large a middle-class endeavor, as I've argued elsewhere, particularly in "Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise." The academy—buttressed by handbooks, grammars, style manuals, and computer checkers of spelling, grammar, style, and other types of errors—is virtually uniform in its insistence on clean, respectable, orderly, well-documented, thesis-driven, author-effacing

"virtually uniform in its insistence on clean, respectable, orderly, well-documented, thesis-driven, author-effacing prose."

prose. And these are some of the stylistic features that the apparatus (consisting of those special textbook features, the "headnotes" and "study questions" designed to provide easy access to each "selection," as well as to determine how each essay is read) addresses in calling attention to vocabulary, usage, and conventions of writing. Indeed, in fairness to the students, virtually all of whom are aiming for middle- and upper-middle-class employment and its accompanying lifestyle upon graduation, there is no viable alternative. The

view of the authors of the 1974 CCCC position paper on "Students' Rights to Their Own Language" (see next section), that all dialects are created equal, accompanied by exhortations to "avoid judging students' dialects in social or economic terms" (16), has received virtually no reinforcement either inside or outside the academy since its inception (see Parks, *passim*).⁴ This is not likely to change as long as standard English remains the dominant and normative

ful though these skills are, because the purpose of our book is to offer you occasions to imagine other ways of reading. We think of reading as a social interaction—sometimes peaceful and polite, sometimes not so peaceful and polite" (4th ed., 1. In this article, I am intentionally using the most recent editions of books published during the time frame of my essay canon research, 1946-96/7). Nevertheless, the readings of essays by the only canonical authors in the 4th edition which Bartholomae and Petroskey encourage—Richard Rodriguez, Alice Walker, and Virginia Woolf—do not seem idiosyncratic; the considerations they raise about these texts are common concerns of textbook editors (and composition teachers) nationwide. One example should suffice: "As you read her essay ["In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens"], observe Walker's methods of working. How does she build her arguments? Where does her evidence come from? her authority? To whom is she appealing? What do her methods allow her to see (and say) and not to see? And, finally, how might her conclusions be related to her methods?" (648).

4. *It's Mine and I'll Write It That Way*, by Dick Friedrich and David Kuester, the textbook that wholeheartedly embraced this philosophy, was published by Random House in 1972, the year that CCCC first addressed "Students' Right. . . ." It should be noted that the authors were colleagues of Elizabeth McPherson, promulgator of the resolution, at Forest Park Community College, St. Louis. That the book was published in only a single edition implies that it was not widely adopted.

dialect of the members of society with status, power, mobility, authority, and esteemed jobs—qualities students and the academic culture (and beyond) expect to be embedded in a college degree. Yet the students' cultural horizons are broadened by virtually all readers on the market today, through the cultural and ethnic diversity of their authors—all writing in standard English—that replace the hegemonic collections by upper-middle-class white males that dominated the readers of fifty years ago.

Freshman Composition, Conservator of Middle Class Values—Ever and Always?

In substance, as in style, says Alan France in “Assigning Places,” “the introductory composition course is crucially implicated in the process of cultural reproduction. Its content is the set of discursive rules that assign students to their proper place in the institutional hierarchies of corporate capitalism . . . [W]riting assignments should be seen not only as work that the instructor is empowered to impose on students, but as a temporary grant of the instructor’s power to ‘speak,’” and thereby to determine the students’ “‘proper’ place in the social distribution of power” (593). The gray sameness of many freshman compositions makes it clear that instructors don’t expect their students to speak out of turn. Despite the prevalence of elitist essays as textbook models, teachers don’t expect students to produce elitist essays but a variety of non-literary forms, ranging from five-paragraph themes to analytic arguments. As a rule, these turn out to be fairly formulaic pieces of prose, a form that Robert Scholes labels in *Textual Power* “pseudo-non-literature,” produced in “an appalling volume” in freshman courses. “We call the production of this stuff ‘composition,’” he laments. And nobody writes “compositions” out of school. For “compositions” are not works of literature but academic exercises, pedagogical products designed for heuristic purposes—either to enhance students’ understanding of the subject at hand or to provide practice in how to write an academic essay (5-10). Despite Scholes’ searing critique—now nearly twenty years old—and the publication of three editions of Scholes, Comley, and Ulmer’s *Text Book*, a clear and readable application of an antidote—“writing through literature rather than writing about it, and on learning literary theory by emulating literary practice” (3rd ed. iv-v)—New Critical writing assignments asking students to “unlock the text” continue to prevail as composition teachers replicate the culture in which they were taught.

To the extent that the academy remains middle class—in reality and in the prevailing cultural expectations of academic writing—there will be little incentive to re-orient composition pedagogy to challenge these middle-class values and aims. Creative writing students may be encouraged to aspire to literary elitism, even if their characters are proletarians. But most other students are not concerned with working-class readers; they are

trained to write serviceable prose aimed, in accord with the goals of their college education, toward academic goals and an academic audience.

Although academia has never been otherwise, in 1972, responsive to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication took issue with acceptance of standard English as the normative language for college level work, passing the following resolution: "We affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of language—the dialects of their nurture or whatever dialects in which their own identity and style . . . We affirm strongly that teachers must have the experiences and training that will enable them to respect diversity and uphold the right of students to their own language" ("Students' Right," 2-3). An amplified version was published two years later as a special issue of *CCC Students' Right to Their Own Language* (Fall 1974); it is still in print and may be purchased from NCTE. The policy remains on the books—but, as Stephen Parks's *Class Politics*, a comprehensive analysis of the history of the "Students' Right" advocacy demonstrates—it is not in the books. Handbooks, rhetorics, and readers all reinforce standard English in all academic situations, as they have always done. Thus despite this call for democratizing the language of and in the academy, echoed in a variety of CCC committees for a dozen years, by 1983 discussion was tabled, no action was taken, the "Students' Right" proposal "became history" (236). Thus France's revisionist suggestions to make freshman composition readings more proletarian and thus Marxist, and therefore more sensitive to the working class (593), remain essentially ignored. By whatever means students develop a social or political consciousness, they will do so in standard English.

It is the rare composition program, or course, that incorporates what Henry Giroux calls critical pedagogy, "in which the knowledge, habits, and skills of critical citizenship, not simply good citizenship, are taught and practiced. This means providing students with the opportunity to develop the critical capacity to challenge and transform existing social and political forms, rather than simply adapt to them" (74). Yet programs that have the potential to be transformative of both social values and student writing exist, primarily as alternative freshman curricula based on service learning—in which students collaborate with members of a variety of real communities to accomplish real projects, from literacy tutoring to building Habitat for Humanity houses (see Cushman; Flower). Thomas Deans's *Writing Partnerships: Service-Learning in Composition* highlights Eyler, Giles Jr., and Braxton's comprehensive study of service learning programs affecting 1500 students in twenty colleges. They conclude that these programs significantly affect "students' attitudes, values, and skills, as well as . . . the way they think about social issues," and found that service learning was "the only significant or best predictor of . . . the capacity of students to see problems as systemic, and the ability to see things from multiple perspectives" (3, ital. Deans). Deans' analysis of four exemplary

service learning programs provides the theoretical and pedagogical rationale for the curriculum he addresses in *Writing and Community Action*, derived in part from the program he directs at Haverford. The readings and writing assignments begin with personal reflections on literacy, and writing in academic communities, before moving to “Literature, Culture, and Social Reflection” and writing about, for, and with real world communities. The writing projects thus include informational brochures, proposals to address “community problems and injustices,” and oral histories (see Chapt. 8 and 9).

Service learning curricula and community involvement require strong, committed, tireless leaders and continual oversight. Thus unless universities and their faculties—either the Freshman English directors or the TAs—have a significant Marxist or service imperative (how likely in today’s corporate universities?), the pervasive middle-class orientation with an emphasis on elitist reading material is likely to prevail, particularly if part-time teachers are constrained by full-time faculty overseers to follow a common syllabus. Textbooks may and do include a variety of essays that support confrontation or resistance to establishment views. Yet only a few essays have become canonical because either their philosophical breadth or style transcends the topicality of most commentaries on current events: Swift’s “Modest Proposal,” Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language,” Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience,” “The Declaration of Independence,” and Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Even “The Declaration of Independence” may be generalized from and read out of or beyond its historical context.⁵

Thus while we may hold these truths to be self-evident, that all students are created equal, that they are endowed by their country and their culture with certain unalienable Rights, these Rights do not include the opportunity to exercise either working-class locutions or upper-class elitist literary strategies. The relatively recent acknowledgment of student and faculty obligations to the wider community, the larger world as represented in service learning programs and other types of real-world writing, exemplify alternatives awaiting larger-scale application. That nearly all available options for college level reading and writing are conducted in standard English is predictable, inevitable, and most would argue, desirable.

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