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literacy matters

writing and reading the social self

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Robert P. Yagelski

foreword by Victor Villanueva

**TEACHERS
COLLEGE
PRESS**

teachers college
columbia university
new york and london

2000

As he hands me the revised version of his essay, "Add It Up," Mr. Green wears a slight smile that displays something between pride and defiance. This essay carries precious meaning for him, and for a moment he reminds me of the many (mostly White) high school and college students who have handed in the papers I asked them to write. Their faces revealed nervous satisfaction, uncertainty, effort, investment. They trusted me with their ideas and their words. Mr. Green does, too, and in that way he is just like them. Then he turns around and walks back to his seat, and I see the bars on the window behind him and realize that the meanings his essay carries are many: contingent and complex and uncertain.

On another day, the students are working individually on an editing exercise intended to help them identify errors in an essay I have already returned to them. I am moving from desk to desk in our prison classroom, answering questions, helping with specific misspellings or punctuation and syntax errors, and I walk past Mr. Smith's desk. He is hunched over his paper, concentrating mightily, correcting the errors in his essay. As I pass him, he looks up, smiling, and says, "This is fun." It is a comment that strikes me as incongruous, an exclamation point where there should be a question mark, a whisper instead of a shriek. How can grammar be fun for someone who has been deemed "remedial" and told throughout his school years that his knowledge of standard English is "substandard"? This young man is sitting in a prison, locked away from his daughter and his home, correcting errors in his writing—and having fun. It occurs to me that he is expressing the simple joy of being able to manipulate written language in order to say something he has to say, the satisfaction of getting it right. But more than that: He also is feeling the subtle excitement that accompanies the realization that writing can represent a kind of power, a realization that he can make his voice heard in an academic setting in a way that gains him credibility and standing within that setting. He *can* do it right. I, too, have experienced that kind of joy—often—and I smile back. But I have never had to write as a Black man in prison, and I have never had to prove to a teacher of a remedial writing class that I can do it right. And I wonder whether my joy is really like his. For the power of literacy does not necessarily refer to the same thing for him that it does for me.

The "local-ness" of literacy can be insufferably complicated.

Chapter 4

Writing Roles for Ourselves

Local Literacies and Students' Lives

I write because I feel politically committed, because I would like to convince other people, without lying to them, that what I dream about and what I speak about and what causes me to struggle are worth writing about. . . . That is, when we write, we cannot ignore our condition as historical beings. We cannot ignore that we are beings inserted into the social structures in which we participate as objects and subjects.

—Paulo Freire, *Letters to Christina*

The self is completely autonomous, yet exists only in resonance with all other selves.

—Robert Aitken, *The Mind of Clover*

On a muggy Ohio summer afternoon I am validated. Four university professors stamp *approved* on my dissertation. Their approval comes at the end of the traditional 2-hour oral dissertation defense, held in a spare but neat English Department conference room, in which they questioned, wondered, argued, pushed, tested, grilled, chatted, laughed, invited, listened, disagreed, and finally agreed. My dissertation is accepted, and so am I.

Eli Goldblatt (1995) has written that "writing is central to the institutional existence of a university." "Take away the buildings," he goes on, "and you have a university in search of a home; take away the writing and a university is unimaginable" (p. 30). Take away my dissertation and I do not exist in that university in the same way I do as a result of that document's approval by my dissertation committee; take away that dissertation, and "I" disappear.

During the oral defense, this question of my "academic identity" is addressed directly. A significant portion of the 2-hour session, maybe

30 minutes or so, is devoted to discussion of a postscript I added to my dissertation. In that postscript, which I titled "On the Context of Writing This Dissertation," I described the trouble I had writing the dissertation: not the expected trouble of crafting a coherent argument or presenting data effectively or structuring the chapters logically; rather, I described my struggle "to maintain what I hoped to be a genuine voice in the writing while conforming to the conventions of an academic dissertation in the field of English—a form seemingly designed to snuff out the writer's voice" (1991, p. 329). Years later, that statement will strike me as simplistic and even naive, a reflection of my adherence to the Romantic conception of the writer (which I critiqued in Chapter 2). But during my oral defense, I cannot see it. And all four members of my committee are surprised by my complaints about "losing" my voice as I wrote the dissertation. One of them confides that she found my dissertation very readable and my voice engaging; she wonders what I found so troublesome about the writing. Others question me about my conception of "voice" (and only much later will I come to see how uncomplicated and problematic my conception of voice was at the time). My dissertation director, who is co-author of a well-known book on collaborative writing, challenges me on this point. You have argued throughout the dissertation that writing is inherently social, she says, so why do you want to hold onto the notion that *your own* writing is not? Why do you insist on valorizing *your* voice as a personal matter rather than something that is socially defined? I know she is right, but in answer to her questions I can only stumble about the familiar terrain of the Romantic writer. Despite my self-proclaimed adherence to a social view of writing, I am unable to think of *my* dissertation as social, as part of the professional discourses that shaped it.

My committee members knew, of course, how central that dissertation was to my professional life. They knew, too, how difficult it can be to write such a document. But they couldn't know at the time the extent to which my difficulties in writing that text went beyond the kinds of problems I discussed with them in the many meetings we had during the year-and-a-half leading up to that oral defense. They couldn't know that my frustration was not just a matter of learning to write academic prose of the kind expected in a dissertation. For I never confided to them that as I was writing that draft, I lamented the passing of the "writer" I once was—a freelance writer whose sense of self was a function of the newspaper and magazine articles I wrote, about whom my father's auto mechanic said, after reading one of my magazine articles, "You're a good *writer*." I worried that I was no longer that same good writer as I became the apprentice researcher/scholar/academic

who authored not magazine articles but a dissertation. I felt my writerly voice becoming fainter with each page I wrote, even as I gained confidence in my ability to participate in the academic conversations that I was hoping to enter through the act of writing that dissertation. At the same time, as I worked through successive drafts of each chapter, I tried to ignore the gnawing suspicion that what I had to say in the dissertation was irrelevant and trite, that I had no business playing the role of scholar, that I knew no more about the importance of writing and reading than I had known all those years before as I whiled away summer afternoons reading in my bedroom or wrote magazine articles read by an appreciative auto mechanic. I imagined an audience of scholars dismissing my work as trivial; I imagined the elders in my family dismissing the "50-cent words" I was using.

Writers—student writers as well as professional writers—often confess to such doubts about their writing. Like all teachers, I have vivid memories of the anxiety with which students hesitantly have handed me essays about important matters in their lives, essays that they believed revealed all their flaws as writers—and as people. Such doubts have been explained in various ways in the professional literature, from "writing apprehension," an almost clinical malady that some researchers (e.g., Rose, 1985) have linked to the cognitive challenges of academic writing, to a lack of familiarity with academic discourse (see Bartholomae, 1985). My own difficulties in writing my dissertation suggest, I think, that such difficulties must be understood within the context of the multiple, shifting, overlapping, often conflicting discourses that are in place in any rhetorical situation: in my case, the disciplinary discourses of composition studies and empirical educational research; the professional discourses of graduate education and scholarly inquiry in the humanities and social sciences; the broader public discourses of education and that I discussed in Chapter 2. But the difficulties I experienced as dissertation writer—like those of Hannah, whose text is reproduced in Chapter 2—also point to the deeply *personal* nature of that decidedly social document. For whatever else it was, that dissertation was my attempt to construct myself within the university and within the broader disciplines I sought to enter as an academic; it is a construction of my *identity*—several identities, actually—just as Hannah's essay about coming to college was an assertion of her own sense of self-worth as a student and a person. In the postscript to my dissertation, I muse about the influence of my own background on my study: the fact that I am White, male, middle class, Polish, raised and schooled a Catholic, and so on. And I complain that somehow these aspects of the "I" who wrote that dissertation are lost

in "the conventions governing academic dissertations" (p. 332). Like Abby, the student I describe in Chapter 1, I did not want to be made irrelevant by "the discourse." I was struggling to maintain some sense of self against a world of discourse that seemed to want to erase or redefine that self. At the same time, as I would eventually come to understand, it was only within discourse that I could construct that self that I so worried about losing.

In many ways, my struggle to construct an academic identity in my dissertation was far more straightforward than the struggles of students like Hannah or Mr. Green to construct themselves in the texts they write. In my case, despite the complexities of the rhetorical situation, the task was rather clear, the purposes more or less overt and widely understood, and the discourses invoked relatively well-defined. But as we saw in the cases of Hannah and Mr. Green, the seemingly straightforward task of writing an academic essay for a college or high school class can be enormously complex and uncertain. To sort out the discourses that come into play in Mr. Green's essay, for example, is no simple matter—either for him or for me as his teacher. To consider the ways in which Mr. Green might effectively enter those discourses and construct a role for himself within them, as I began to do in Chapter 3, is trickier still. But it is essential, I think, to try to tease out the ways in which student writers can do so, keeping in view the contradictions and possibilities that literacy represents for them as they do. In other words, if literacy is participation in discourse, and if that participation is inescapably local, as I have been arguing, then literacy is inevitably about the complex and uncertain task of constructing a self or selves that can enter specific discourses in order to *act* in specific situations for specific purposes—academic or otherwise.

As we saw in Chapter 3, that self is a complex, sometimes conflicted, even uncertain entity, a multifaceted and contingent *subject*, one that arises from unique configurations of factors that Paul Smith (1988) has defined as the subject's *self-interest*. My dissertation was in the end an effort to construct a multifarious self. It was an attempt to claim a space for myself within the complex professional discourses I sought to participate in and to act within those discourses in a way that had real consequences in my life and the lives of others. And that effort to construct an academic identity was complicated by the fact that my "self" encompasses other identities that are ostensibly distinct from my academic identity: son, father, husband, brother, neighbor. Ultimately, that text, even though it was read by only a few people, and fewer still who were not academics (including my family), helped

define my "nonacademic self" as much as it helped define my academic identity.

For students, this task of writing oneself through and into and (as we'll see momentarily) *against* discourses that are often conflicting, unfamiliar, and even "invisible" to them can be just as challenging but no less significant. As their teacher, I am interested in understanding better how their texts came to be so that I might be able to help them claim agency for themselves and ultimately develop the kind of critical literacy that Paulo Freire (1970/1984) describes, a literacy based on the notion that writing and reading are part of the ongoing struggle to become "fully human." And I believe to do so is to understand, to the extent that I can, how their specific texts represent local acts of self-construction, attempts to write themselves into the broader discourses that shape their lives. And so, drawing on the conception of *local literacy* that I laid out in Chapter 3, and keeping in view the contradictions and possibilities of literacy that I explored in Chapter 2, I want to look more closely at the writing of some of the students I have come to know, as a way to begin to understand their writing more fully as acts of self-construction in discourse.

CELINA

On the first day of class, I wend my way from my office through the network of tunnels and corridors that lie beneath the uptown campus of the State University of New York at Albany. I am on my way to the TV-studio-converted-to-computer-lab that will be my classroom for the semester. The *Peterson's Guide to Colleges and Universities* describes the campus tunnel system at SUNY-Albany as a practical and convenient way for students to avoid the sharp winter cold that usually arrives in upstate New York in early November and lingers through March. But the dim passages, with their partially painted cinder block walls and exposed pipes and ducts, feel dungeon-like to me. And the classroom they lead me to isn't much better. On three sides hang dark reddish, heavy curtains, obscuring the walls from the floor to the high ceiling, dingy reminders that this room was not originally intended for a writing class. Six or seven rows have been made from folding tables pushed together, end to end. Three dozen outdated DEC computers are spaced along these tables, with bunches of multicolored cables hanging down from the back of each computer, exposed, like sloppy remnants of threadbare bunting. A small desk with a newer computer, a portable blackboard, and an overhead projector stand at the front of

the room. I walk to that desk, turn on the computer, and begin to pull papers from my bag as the students arrive.

The class is English 303Z, a nonfiction writing workshop that is part of the English Department's new undergraduate writing sequence. It has never before been offered at SUNY-Albany, and I am happy to have the opportunity to teach it. During the previous semester, when course schedules were being finalized, I requested that the class be scheduled in a computer lab. This converted TV studio was the only available facility. In some ways, the physical space made available to the class is a metaphor for the place of writing within the SUNY-Albany curriculum: The value of writing instruction of the kind offered in the course is questioned by many faculty, and unlike most larger state universities, SUNY-Albany has no required first-year writing course. But like the students in my prison writing class, the dozen or so students who signed up for this course harbor few doubts about the value of writing.

They reflect the diversity about which we talk so much in our professional discussions: White men and women of "traditional" college age, most from "the City" or "the Island," as they refer to New York City and Long Island; several students of color; a few older "nontraditional" students. But their diversity challenges these ready categories. Gary, for instance, who will graduate at the end of the semester, immigrated with his parents from Haiti to New York City when he was in sixth or seventh grade. His bilingual background and difficulties with English qualified him for ESL programs in the public school he attended. To describe him as a person of color or as an ESL student is to obscure the complex background he brings to his writing class, where he will describe in one essay the experience of being treated unfairly and with obvious bias by an African-American teacher who, he says, disliked Haitians. Larry is a 25-year-old White man from a rural area north of Albany who found his way to SUNY after taking courses at several community colleges. Like Gary, he will graduate at the end of the semester; like Gary, his command of academic English is tenuous at best. Unlike Gary, he is White and middle class. Celina, an African-American woman in her mid-20s, is a single mother who works full-time as a supervisor in an insurance company and attends school nearly full-time as well. She is from a nearby city that is both urban and suburban, where she lives in a predominantly White neighborhood and attended a predominantly White public high school. Sophia, a White woman in her 30s, is also a single mother. She has been raising her three children in "the projects" (as she calls her urban neighborhood)

of a nearby city after her abusive husband left her. She is able to attend school full-time through public assistance, whose rules prevent her from earning extra money. Jennifer is a White woman who seems in every way a "traditional" undergraduate. Around mid-semester she will stop attending classes and eventually take an "incomplete" for the course in order to have a baby, which she will raise on her own. There are a few others whose backgrounds are also more diverse than the categories of "White woman" or "African-American man" suggest.

By this point in the semester, when the dust from registration, financial aid, and drop/add procedures finally has begun to settle, only nine students remain in the course—well short of the 15-student limit for these new writing workshop courses. A few minutes after today's class begins, they are spread out in the dim makeshift computer classroom, each at his or her favorite seat. The many empty chairs and tables, the blank curtain-covered walls, and the high ceiling make their small number seem even smaller. Today, we will discuss Celina's draft of her essay for the second formal writing assignment of the semester. For that second assignment, I have asked the students "to draw on your own experiences to explore an issue or problem in education that might interest the rest of us and help us better understand education." Their first assignment was a narrative of a "significant experience in education" in which they were asked to tell the story of that experience in a way that might reveal something about education, about learning, about school. This second assignment, I have told them, is not a narrative; its purpose is to explore more broadly an issue or problem in education that grew out of the narrative they wrote for the first assignment. Celina's response to this assignment startles me. She is a quiet, almost serene woman whose soft eyes are always observant, engaged. She has not been the most active participant in our classroom discussions, but when she does speak, her insight emerges. There is a calm confidence about her that seems anomalous in light of how constantly hectic her life outside the classroom is. She is also confident as a writer, although up to this point in the semester she has not taken what I would consider to be any obvious risks in her work. Her first essay was the story of her mother's experience in returning to school as a middle-aged single mother who moved from the rural southern town where she grew up to Albany, New York. It is a touching story, but after reading the revised version, I did not think that Celina quite did justice to it. She wasn't entirely satisfied with the piece either, but she seemed to want to play it safe. So I am not quite ready for the approach she takes in her second essay.

BE WHO WE BEEN

Everyone in the room realized that our decision in favor of Black English had doomed our writings, even as the distinctive reality of our Black lives always has doomed our efforts to "be who we been" in this country.

—June Jordan

Langston Hughes, June Jordan, Franz Fanon, Malcolm X, all of dem wrote about Black English. So it aint nothin new. But white people keep it out the schools and out the books so black people only learn what white call standard English. Black people been pushed out they own culture and pushed into white culture. White people set up a whole system to hold Black people down. Where black people live, where they go to school, what they watch on t.v, where they work, what they buy at the store, where they work, what they learn in school, how they talk, white people try to control all a that. And they been doin it since forever in this country.

Slavery, then segregation and Jim Crow, then now when white people in newspapers and t.v. talkin about racism is gone which is a lie, but now they tryin to take away anything that help black people. For the whole time, they been working on black people to make black people think like white people think. White people own just about everything and they decide what is good or bad and then everything they do got a part of how they think in it. Like they think black people is criminals and they harass, arrest and put mostly black people in jail. They think white people is better workers, smarter and more reliable than black people and they discriminate. and hire white people instead a black people. And white people got the best jobs and make the most money. Then they take they money and buy the best houses and move into the best neighborhoods and send they kids to the best schools. Meantime, black people aint hardly got no money and live in the worst places and got to live where people tryin to survive legally or illegally and they kids go to the worst schools.

All a this been buildin up year after year since slavery one way or another and black people been tryin to get out a they situation. Black people see everywhere, in everything, what white people do and what they got, how they different. Everything they see tells dem that white people and all the things white people got is so much better than what they got. Then

they start tryin to imitate white people and what they got. White people want black people to do that. They want them to think like that. That way wont nothin really change. White people will be on top and black people will think they need to be at the top and be like white people. Or they think the only way to get to the top is be like white people. White people been sayin black people is inferior since they ships was at Africa shore. Black people is savages, they been sayin, that need to be civilized. They claim to be civilizing black people with everything they do and that they the most civilized. They put they "civilized" in everything so that nobody wont think no other way: Europe got the most refined, "civilized" cities; the greatest leaders in history was white; the American dream is bein blue eyed, blonde headed, livin in the suburbs—mommy, daddy and 2.5 kids; our founding fathers made this country great; classical music is civilized, rap aint; standard English is English, Black English aint.

Black people took in all a the ideas white people put out in society. They believed it. They aint the only ones. A whole lotta people get worked on by ideology. But black people usually the biggest victim because everything they do gets suppressed, pushed out. That how they language get kept out a schools and school books. And it aint but a few novels and things that wrote in Black English period. A language a whole group a people got shut out and almost got took away. White people say that standard English the correct English. How come it is? They American English aint the same as England English. Its they own English. Black English aint the same as standard English. Its black peoples own English.

Black English grew out a combination of all kinds of African languages mixing up since from slavery time and the standard English mixing up with it too. Black English done changed some since way back like other languages. Black English got rules and follow a pattern. Thats why people that talk Black English understand each other even if they never met or never even lived in the same place. Black English do got dialects so some words or things people from a different area dont understand.

Black English aint no harder than standard English to learn. Aint nothin wrong with Black English that it aint considered part a "correct" English except that the white people and ideology got everybody thinking that its only one right language and that the one they put into everything. But its like

this, why cant we have more than one right language? Why we got to talk only one way? Why that one way gotta be standard English? Why aint it Black English? What make standard English better than Black English cant do the same thing?

White people keep they way a thinkin in everything including language and they set things up so that nobody dont even hardly recognize whats happening. Everybody just be thinking that one thing is good or better than something else, like standard English is better than Black English, and everybody start trying to write and talk and read in standard English. Black people trying to change how they communicate so it could be like the standard English. So they can get some of the power that white people got and so that they can be like them. Black people trying to change the way they communicate so it could be like the standard English. When they block out they language, they block out they history, they culture. They think like the standard English tell you to think. They pick up the values that all in standard English and they pick up the culture that makes standard English and sustain it. Standard English push all a the blackness out and try to stop black people from being who we been.

If I am surprised by this essay, I shouldn't be surprised by the discussion it provokes during our class workshop. Sophia, never one to hesitate to offer her view, says that Celina's unconventional approach in the essay is right on target. Celina, she says, needs to use "Black English" to make her point. A few others agree. But there is some uneasiness as well. Larry, who has struggled to write effectively in academic forms, worries about standards. Celina's point is important, he says, and her approach is interesting, but allowing such writing in academic settings inevitably would weaken standards. That comment, of course, leads to much discussion about language conventions and race and education. It is a sometimes-intense discussion, although never hostile, and I consider it productive, for it raises issues about literacy that I want my students to consider carefully. It is the kind of discussion that can begin to challenge the myths about literacy, such as I examined in Chapter 2, that many of them espouse.

Despite the intensity of the discussion, Celina is her usual calm, measured self. In truth, the discussion was really not about Celina's draft but about the larger issues her essay was intended to raise about language and power and race relations. And she seems pleased by that (as am I). But what is hidden from her classmates as they engage her

text are the many other meanings that it carries for her. In other circumstances, such as a larger class in which I would have fewer one-on-one interactions with the students, those meanings, and the struggles her text represents for her as a writer and as a person, would be hidden from me as well.

Later, in my office, Celina and I discuss her draft as she considers revising it for the required mid-semester portfolio. She confesses to having had trouble with the language in the original draft, and she is unsure about some of the revisions suggested by her classmates. In an email message she sent to me prior to our meeting, she tried to describe her uncertainties.

I used as a basis for the technical aspect of writing and constructing the language the rules June Jordan listed in her book. I tried to follow the rule that says use direct language, which is why I repeatedly list white people in my piece. I also used the rule which says that if it dont sound like it came out of somebody's mouth, it aint right. I fear that in focusing on getting the language right, I missed focusing on the direction and content of the paper . . . I am still struggling to let go of my standard English in favor of Black English so there are some problems with consistency of language.

Celina's sophisticated sense of how language works is evident in this message. She is able to articulate the complexities of language use in a much savvier way than most undergraduates I have worked with. We talk again about her concerns and about her goals for the piece (some of which have already been realized, given the discussion the draft provoked during our in-class workshop). But I am not much help. My suggestions focus on matters of style and tone and how these will affect her readers, and I confess to her my worry that her use of Black English, as she calls it, will undercut her implicit argument about language and community and power. Some readers, I suggest, especially white readers, might dismiss her essay as too simplistic and focus on the intentional "errors" in the essay, thus missing the compelling argument about language and race that drives the piece. (Larry's reaction during the workshop is an example of the kind of concern I am expressing.) I suggest that she try to incorporate elements of conventional academic argument into her piece without changing the Black English style; that is, she might try to make reference to some of the other readings we have done as a way to bolster her position. Or she can try to use multiple voices, weaving together "Black English" with

"standard" academic prose. In other words, I am advising her to retain her argument but to make it something a little closer to a conventional academic argumentative essay. She is unsure. She knows what she wants to say in her piece, but my suggestions seem unsatisfactory, as if I can't quite see the real issue.

Struggling to Construct a Self Within Discourse

In some ways, Celina's difficulties with this essay are straightforward and not entirely surprising given the challenges such an essay presents to a student writer. We can think of those challenges in terms of the *voice* she is trying to construct, the *style* she uses to help construct that voice, and the expectations of her intended audience (in this case, her classmates and myself)—all of which are conventional and valid "writerly" concerns. We might also address the nature of *argument* in academic writing (for despite its unconventional nature, her essay is still an academic piece): how it functions in a context such as her writing class and in the institutional setting of the university; the conventions governing academic argument; and so on. To an extent, these issues did come up in the workshop, and I addressed them as well in my conference with Celina.

But although these concerns represent valid ways of thinking and talking about this essay, they don't enable us to address adequately the way in which this essay functions within the context of the broader academic and cultural discourses that seem to be at play in this piece of writing; nor do they allow us to gain insight into the more personal significance of this essay for Celina: how this essay represents her ongoing effort to confront those discourses and find voice within and against them, how the essay reflects her struggle to claim agency for herself in an academic context. If we begin to examine Celina's essay in terms of this struggle to participate in discourse and to construct a self that can act within discourses that inevitably shape that self, other issues come more clearly into view, and we may gain some insight into her text that can be hidden when we focus on those more conventional issues I focused on in my meeting with her; we may see better what this essay "means."

First, consider the overt and even self-conscious way that Celina's essay draws on several rather well-defined discourses. Three emerge as central to her essay: (1) the specific discourse of "Black English," which relates to other discourses about language and race; (2) the broader cultural discourse surrounding race relations in contemporary American society; (3) and the more or less conventional academic discourses im-

plicit in her writing, to which she refers in her email comment. Obviously, the distinctions I am making here among these discourses are artificial, since these discourses overlap and cannot be separated so easily from each other. And that is part of the point here: For although we try to define these discourses separately in order to illuminate Celina's writing, the larger cultural discourses about language and race relations overlap with, inform, and at the same time conflict with the discourses of academic writing, linguistics, and language theory such that distinctions blur. Thus, how we talk about, in the popular media, and understand, say, ebonics as an issue of language use cannot be separated from popular conceptions and ways of talking about race relations or from educational discussions about teaching writing and reading or from academic discussions about representations of race and language, and so on. The controversy surrounding ebonics in Oakland, California, in 1997 revealed the complex ways in which these various discourses intermingle in public and professional discussions. Similarly, Celina's attempt to make an academic argument about language use by consciously adopting a nonacademic style cannot be seen as situated entirely within a distinct and specific academic discourse. *Discourse* is simply too messy to allow for such clean distinctions and definitions. Instead, Celina's essay can be seen as situated at the shifting intersections of these various discourses that somehow encompass issues of language and race.

It's important to keep in mind that these discourses are not static nor are they monolithic. As Paul Smith (1988) points out, discourses not only contradict each other, but they contain inherent contradictions within themselves. For example, professional discussions about literacy education often focus on the importance of valuing a student's own language even when that language is unconventional (as articulated, for example, in the well-known NCTE document *Students' Right to Their Own Language*); at the same time, specific standards of language use are reaffirmed and also valued (as in the standards movement supported by NCTE in the late 1990s). In addition, popular discussions of literacy education often focus on the importance of setting rigorous standards for writing and reading performance in schools in ways that clash with how standards for literacy are understood in professional educational discussions. So ways of thinking and talking about specific issues can vary and diverge both within and among discourses.

Furthermore, since we confront and construct our worlds through language, discourse inevitably shapes not just how we use language but how we think about and understand our worlds. In this case,

Celina does not merely draw on specific *styles* or conventions of language use associated with specific discourses as if she is selecting a font style in her word processing program; she conceptualizes the issues about which she writes within and through those same discourses. So the discourses—of academic argument, of race relations, of language use, and so on—upon which she draws and within which she writes shape both her language and her understanding of these matters as well. And she, in turn, *acts* upon those discourses through her writing. Further, Celina's sense of herself—as a student, as a woman, as an African American—is also a function of these same discourses. Each of those discourses makes available to her specific “subject-positions” at the same time that it limits the subject-positions that are available to her. Celina is positioned differently within these different discourses. Her *identity* is thus not a direct effect of discourse, but it also cannot be separated from discourse.

In short, if we see Celina's essay as an act of self-construction in discourse, the complexity of that act begins to emerge in ways that can be obscured by our more conventional emphases on matters of academic style and convention.

At this point it's also important to distinguish here between the very useful arguments of scholars like David Bartholomae and Patricia Bizzell about the role of *academic discourse* in student writing and the kind of analysis of writing as participation in discourse that I am trying to conduct here. For scholars like Bartholomae and Bizzell, the primary assumption is that when students engage in academic reading and writing activities, they are in effect being asked to enter a discourse community with which they are largely unfamiliar and to which they do not necessarily already belong. As Bartholomae (1985) puts it, they are, in effect, learning

to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community. Or perhaps I should say the *various* discourses of our community, since it is in the nature of a liberal arts education that a student, after the first year or two, must learn to try on a variety of voices and interpretive schemes—to write, for example, as a literary critic one day and as an experimental psychologist the next; to work within fields where rules governing the presentation of examples or the development of an argument are both distinct and, even to a professional, mysterious. (pp. 134–135, emphasis in original)

These students are, Bartholomae says, “trying to write their way into a new community” (p. 156).

This perspective provides a powerful way to explain some of the difficulties students have with school-sponsored writing as they try to master the conventions of this “new language” and acquire unfamiliar ways of knowing that characterize academic discourse. We can make sense of many of the “problems” we saw in Mr. Green's and Mr. Jarrel's essays in Chapter 3, for instance, by thinking of their essays as attempts to use the conventions of academic writing with which they are not entirely familiar or comfortable. We can gain insight into Celina's essay in the same way. For instance, her struggle to make a coherent argument throughout her essay may arise in part from her lack of experience in constructing conventional academic arguments. But I wish to extend the analysis beyond a focus on discourse itself to the role of the student writer within discourse. Bartholomae's focus on language convention and specific ways of knowing that are associated with academic discourse, I think, tends to obscure the complexity of that discourse—really, *discourses*, as Bartholomae himself points out; moreover, it does not give us sufficient means by which to examine how those discourses figure into how students understand and construct themselves as writers and thinkers and persons, nor does it enable us to see the conflicted relationship between academic discourses and the other discourses that are in place in a situation such as this. For there is more, I think, to Celina's essay than her struggle to negotiate a rather tricky rhetorical situation and to make an ambitious although unconventional academic argument. It is not just an attempt to enter an unfamiliar academic discourse community but also part of her effort to construct a self that can claim agency within as well as outside that community and its discourses.

Self-Interest and the Complexity of Self-Construction

Celina provided some insight into all this when she discussed this essay in her portfolio. I had asked the students to include a self-evaluation in which they discussed their first two essays for the course. The second essay to which Celina refers below is the essay on Black English (reproduced above); the first is the narrative about her mother that I referred to earlier. Here, in part, is what she wrote about her work on that second essay:

The best of the two essays is the second essay. While I was struggling somewhat to work out the piece, I think I accomplished much more of what I wanted to than with the first piece. The second essay is also a more objective piece meaning it is not specifically about me and I am much more comfortable to

write about subjects that are not too personal or that are specifically about me or my family. The second essay was as much an exercise of constructing the right tone and the right language and the right message as it was about the "implications" of the piece. Questions came up, from within and from others, about who I am writing this for; to whom is this message addressed, what audience. Also what is the best way to structure the piece? Should it be written completely in Black English? . . . Anyway, I finally concluded that I will use strictly Black English, with the exception of one part, and there is an explicit reason why I use standard English there. The paper is a "political" piece, I decided, and that the message has to be made "all the way live", there can be no "half steppin" here. So the second essay worked on a lot more than just my technical writing skills—putting a well written essay together and making my point. The whole question of well written was at stake here and I was not so sure that I could make it work. I was determined, but not sure. I had to play out, or talk out, the essay over and over again in my head, to myself out loud, to my friends, to my peers, to teachers, to my co-workers. Everyone's opinion could be categorized by race. The White people that I talked to said—mix the language. It was too "simple" sounding and too easy to "dismiss". It was never going to be considered "acceptable". The Black people that I talked to said—don't give up anything. If you are going to make the statement say it, and say it right.

It seems clear that this essay was about more than just "putting a well written essay together and making my point," as Celina puts it. She obviously invested a great deal of herself in this essay, and perhaps the more so since she was one of only two students of color in the class for which she was writing this piece. Celina was making her case about the validity of "Black English" to her White classmates but also to a broader imagined (and perhaps real) audience of White readers. But she makes it plain that she also was writing for Black readers, almost as if to assert that she is not "half steppin" in a way that could be seen as repudiating her home dialect and her race. She is, in other words, not just making an academic argument; she is writing also to construct an identity that encompasses the successful student in a mainstream academic institution as well as the African-American woman who grew up in a suburban community and in predominantly Black urban communities in Albany, Detroit, New York City, and Chi-

cago, where her extended family lived. It is an identity that encompasses a home language that differs from mainstream academic language but is deeply important in her daily life. Constructing that identity is more than a matter of becoming familiar with the conventions of academic discourse; it is a matter of negotiating among various complicated, overlapping discourses and claiming agency for herself within and against them.

That self-construction is mediated by Celina's complex *self-interest*. She claims in her self-evaluation that she is much more comfortable writing "about subjects that are not too personal or that are specifically about me or my family." And while that revelation may seem to explain some of the decisions she made in her second essay, it also implicitly reflects the complex personal aspects that came into play as she wrote that essay. Her first essay, which told the story of her mother's struggle to raise her children and return to school to earn a nursing degree, revealed the power of her desire to validate and give voice to her mother as single Black mother. But it also represented her attempt to define herself as a Black woman, one who, like her mother, is also a single parent returning to school. In that first essay, she described her mother's struggle to overcome a difficult past characterized by segregated schools and a relocation from the southern state where she was born to New York, where eventually she succeeded, on her own, as a returning student. Although Celina never refers overtly to this part of her personal life in her essay on Black English, the experiences she describes in the first essay and her sense of herself as the daughter of a determined Black woman nevertheless seem to energize that second essay. In other words, given what we know of Celina as a person—a woman of color, a single parent, the daughter of a single mother who achieves academic and professional success—her second essay becomes more than an attempt to enter the discourses about language use and race relations; it becomes another part of her effort to construct her complex identity within those discourses.

I want to emphasize at this point that I am not referring specifically to *personal* writing here. Much debate in composition studies and English education has focused on the relative merits—and dangers—of assigning personal narrative essays in English or composition classes.¹ The terms of that debate, in my view, largely ignore the fact that to some extent *all* writing is "personal" and that genres such as personal narrative are not always as clearly defined as they may seem. In my English 303Z class, I assigned a personal narrative for the first assignment primarily as a vehicle for exploration of the issues concerning literacy and education that I wanted to encourage students to confront;

only secondarily was I interested in allowing students opportunities to explore personal narrative as a genre. But whether they were writing something that might be called "personal narrative" or "academic argument," their complicated *self-interest* came into play as they made the countless decisions about subject matter and language and style that writers must make as they construct their texts. What I am suggesting here is that to understand Celina's writing adequately—both her narrative about her mother and her argument about Black English—I must try to take that self-interest into account as best I can and understand her essay not only as shaped by that self-interest but also as a statement about herself. And in doing so I can gain insight into how her essay came to be—and the significance it might carry for her. With that insight, perhaps I can find ways to help her make that essay work better for her own purposes as well as for the purposes of the course for which she is writing.

This effort to account for a student writer's self-interest goes beyond the traditional effort on the part of teachers to understand something of their students' life situations in order to work more effectively with students. Good writing teachers, I think, always approach their students' work with a measure of empathy and understanding. But I am suggesting something more here: that in completing her academic writing assignments for my writing course, Celina is not simply negotiating the complexities of academic discourses but is also engaging in acts of self-construction through writing; her writing is thus about who she is and can be within specific circumstances as much as about what she wants to say. Her texts become a kind of "shared territory," as Margaret Himley (1991) puts it, "in which persons *compose* and express their individuation within, through, and against culture" (p. 5, emphasis added).

Over the course of the semester—and subsequent semesters—I learned more about Celina and came to appreciate more fully the significance of her essay on Black English to her. I learned, for example, that as one of the few African-American students in her mostly White public school, she felt a need to adopt several more or less public social roles that were available to her within these communities and within the discourses in place in those communities. One of those roles was the "good Black student" who spoke and acted "properly"—that is, who spoke and acted "White." Another was the "Black student" who interacted easily with the few other African-American students in the school—that is, who could act "Black" in ways that were acceptable both to her African-American friends and to the mostly White student body and faculty. Another still was the "Black girl" who lived in a pre-

dominantly White neighborhood—that is, who could act "Black" in ways that were acceptable and appropriate in that community. And still another was "Black daughter/cousin/niece/mother" who could speak and act in ways that were appropriate in an African-American community as well. All these roles involved different language practices. And these language practices not only were vehicles by which Celina adopted roles for herself, but were also reflections of these roles—social markers, as it were. For Celina, awareness of the ways in which these roles often conflicted with each other began to emerge as she moved from high school to college. She initially attended Howard University, an historically Black college where she was asked to be "Black" in ways that differed from her home and high school community. That experience brought into relief some of her difficulties in adopting those various "Black" roles in her high school and home community. Of course, Howard was a place that gave rise to other roles for her as well: African-American scholar, African-American woman academic. At Howard, too, she encountered new discourses of the academy within which these roles were defined.

As her writing teacher, I did not necessarily have to know all this in order to help Celina become a more proficient academic writer. But knowing some of her background not only illuminated for me the struggles she faced in writing an essay like the one about Black English but also began to reveal the ways in which that essay related to her sense of self and her effort to construct an identity and claim agency for herself within and outside the university. Clearly, it was in *my* interest as her teacher to understand something about how her self-interest—which was a function of these varied and complex experiences and roles—played out in her writing. Such an understanding can help me avoid approaching her essay as a straightforward response to a conventional academic writing assignment, which would oversimplify matters in ways that would not, I believe, serve Celina's needs as writer and person. Certainly, some of the difficulties she experienced in writing her essay about Black English arose from the intellectual challenge of constructing a complex academic argument about language and power; similarly, some arose from her attempt to work within and against the conventions of academic writing. Just as certainly, her essay was much more than an academic exercise. It was part of her struggle to write herself into the discourses—academic and cultural—about race and language; it was an effort to construct herself as a young African-American woman within and through—and against—those discourses.

bell hooks (1989) has written eloquently about the tricky ground that she traversed as an African-American woman trying to find a voice

within the sometimes exclusionary discourses of the academy. She describes a struggle, much like Celina's, to construct an identity within the academy that enables her to gain access to the privileges of the academy without erasing or repudiating her race and gender and class background. It is no easy task to construct such an identity, and hooks refers to the obstacles to doing so within the academy and to her need to do so in the face of such obstacles: "I want to speak about these contradictions [between home and school] because sorting through them, seeking resolution and reconciliation has been important to me both as it affects my development as a writer, my effort to be fully self-realized, and my longing to remain close to the family and community that provided the groundwork for much of my thinking, writing, and being" (p. 75). Hooks insists that giving voice to this struggle to construct an identity sometimes means working explicitly against the language conventions of the academic world: "[T]he use of a language and style of presentation that alienates most folks who are not academically trained reinforces the notion that the academic world is separate from real life, that everyday world where we constantly adjust our language and behavior to meet diverse needs" (p. 78). Accordingly, she argues for a language that works against insularity, against a situation in which "academics and/or intellectuals can only speak to one another" (p. 78). For hooks, this effort involves more than writing and speaking plainly in ways that nonacademics can easily understand. It is about power: "What is true is that we make choices, that we choose our audiences, that we choose voices to hear and voices to silence" (p. 78).

In some ways, Celina's essay about Black English represents a concrete example of the kind of struggle that hooks describes and reinforces hooks's insistence that other, nonacademic discourses be brought into academic conversations. To do so is to validate the racial and gendered and class-based identity that hooks wants to preserve as she carves out a space for herself in the discourses of the academy. But hooks's characterization of academic language practices and her description of her efforts to remain true to her family and community seem to mask some of the complexities of the challenges facing a student writer like Celina. For Celina, there is no straightforward dichotomy between her "home" language and the language of the academy. Discourse, as I've already noted, is messier than that. And although Celina's essay about Black English might suggest that the problem is a relatively simple matter of making allowances within the academy—and in society more generally—for "alternative" or nonmainstream ways of speaking and writing, her own experience as an African American negotiating among several discourse communities indicates that the

issue is more complicated, for just as academic discourse is not monolithic, neither is Black English. Further, hooks (1989) suggests that the central struggle is to maintain some sense of her "real" identity as a Black, working-class woman within a setting whose language and language practices work against such an identity. But as I suggested in Chapter 3, "identity" is always conflicted and necessarily constructed within discourse, such that Celina's identity outside academe is as complex and circumscribed as is her identity on campus. Her experience thus underscores this complex relationship among language, literacy, and identity: She adopts different roles in different settings and constructs slightly different identities—or has different identities constructed for her—through discourse in those different settings. She is always "Black," but "Black" might mean different things in, say, her home community, her high school English classroom, and her high school cafeteria; it means something different at Howard University and at SUNY-Albany. And her engagement in specific acts of reading and writing—and speaking—in these different settings reflects those varied and sometimes conflicting identities. In short, the effort to construct a self that can claim some agency in a specific situation—academic or otherwise—is never so simple a matter as overtly resisting discourse conventions or writing (or speaking) in one's "true" language.

I am arguing here that this effort to construct such a self is always part of the writing and reading that students do, that we all do, even when those acts of writing and reading seem to be relatively straightforward efforts to complete a conventional academic task. Celina's final essay of the semester in English 303Z, for instance, was ostensibly a conventional research paper that grew out of the previous writing and reading assignments in the course. Celina chose as her topic the movement to establish African-American immersion schools, all-Black primary and secondary schools whose curricula emphasize African-American culture. But a look at the opening passage of her paper, which she titled "It Takes a Whole Village to Raise a Child: The Need for African-American Immersion Schools in the Post-Integration Era," indicates that this apparently conventional paper is as much a part of her ongoing effort to construct herself and claim agency for herself as her essay on Black English was. Her attempt to write herself into the various discourses that are in place with respect to these complex issues seems clear in the context of her previous writing.

I was not yet born when the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously agreed that the doctrine of "separate but equal" was inherently unequal and ordered the desegregation of schools, but I do

know that decision has greatly impacted my life. I was raised in the suburbs and I have lived a fairly comfortable life. I have never wanted for food or clothes or shelter, nor front or backyard in which to play, nor toys or activities to occupy my time, nor a room of my own. And I am blessed with a family full of my best friends. As a child I liked to play kick ball, tennis, ride bikes and go swimming. . . .

Living a comfortable life in the suburbs and attending well funded schools that provided me the opportunity to get the education and develop the talents and skills that are highly valued in the larger society was part of the legacy of desegregation. I have been well versed in the norms and culture of White mainstream society.

Perhaps the flip side of my experience is the Black students in inner city schools, the children who languish in schools and in environments that have blocked their opportunities to survive, let alone flourish. Some four decades after the Brown v. Board of Education decision, Blacks are still disproportionately affected by poverty, crime, violence, poor living and working conditions, under and unemployment, undereducation and miseducation. Black children in inner city schools are more likely than their White counterparts to be truant, suspended or expelled or drop out of high school. Traditional schooling has been largely unsuccessful in meeting the needs of African American students even in this post-integration era. A quote from one frustrated student at a poor, inner city school in East St. Louis sums up the sad state of today's poor urban schools: "We have a school in East St. Louis named for Dr. King. . . . The school is full of sewer water and the doors are locked with chains. Every student in that school is black. It's like a terrible joke on history" (Qtd in Kozol 35).

Too many African American children have not benefited from the social and (personal) rewards that desegregation promised. Consider this:

- Homicide is the leading cause of death for Black males ages 15–24 (Wright 14). . . .
- The gap between Black and White unemployment rates grew in the 1980s and for the most part, the difference has always been *at least double* (Marger 322).
- Black college graduates have jobless rates much higher than White college graduates (Marger 322).

- White high school drop outs have a lower jobless rate than college educated Blacks (Marger 321). . . .

In the mid 1980s educators, public administrators, journalists, parents and scholars began seriously rethinking schools and education in an effort to address the failures of schools for Black children in the inner city. As a result, African American immersion schools (AAIS) emerged.

As a writing teacher, I see in this text a student writer who has mastered many of the most important conventions of academic writing and who has developed the ability to successfully complete a specialized if conventional academic task. That ability in itself, as scholars like Patricia Bizzell (1989) and Lisa Delpit (1995) have provocatively argued, represents a measure of power for Celina. It is a means for claiming agency by entering the conversations of academe and society and giving voice to her ideas and concerns. This is no small achievement for any student. And yet these few paragraphs of Celina's research paper also reveal that this piece of writing is anything but conventional, that it grows out of—and is part of—her effort to construct a self, to write herself into the discourses that shape her life. In that sense, the achievement this paper represented for her was even greater.

LARRY

Later in that same semester, I am sitting in our basement classroom with Larry. Class has finished for the day, but Larry and I remain to work on a draft of an essay he is writing. Sophia is there, too, having stayed after class to ask me a question about an assignment. So is Gary, who is having some of the same problems Larry is having—except that Gary's difficulties result largely from what ESL scholars call "second language interference." The four of us sit together at one of the rows in the center of the room, and our physical closeness makes the room feel even emptier than it normally feels. Larry is a bit frustrated with his draft, and he is asking me about some of the comments I have written on it. After reading it a day or two earlier, I asked him to speak to me directly, because the draft contained so many problems that worried me so late in the semester. Some are problems that I expect to see in student writing even at this stage: lack of focus, underdeveloped ideas, weak organization—troublesome but relatively straightforward "technical" writing problems that teachers routinely address

in student writing. But some are problems that I don't expect to see very much in an advanced writing workshop, especially in the draft of a student who will graduate in a few weeks: sentence fragments and run-on sentences that indicate to me a lack of control of some basic conventions of written English; and larger difficulties with the development of ideas, which indicate difficulty in sustaining a coherent, extended argument in an academic essay. These problems appeared periodically in Larry's writing earlier in the semester, and we discussed them in conference. But his latest essay seems to have even more of these problems. I am worried, and I tell him so.

Despite the seriousness of the writing problems I want to discuss with Larry, the atmosphere in that almost-empty classroom is relaxed. And that's no surprise, since by now Larry has established himself as something of the class cut-up. He likes to throw out one-liners in an unthreatening kind of way that endears him to most of his classmates, who appreciate the way he helps lighten the atmosphere in that dingy classroom. In turn Larry seems to relish the subtle jokes that I sometimes return at his expense.

"Wait a minute!" he interrupted as I demonstrated a computer technique during a recent class. His interjection provoked smiles and a few chuckles from his classmates, who are by now well acquainted with his computer foibles. "I'm stuck!" The slight smile, barely visible in the dim light, betrayed his enjoyment of the attention he receives whenever he gets "stuck."

"Yes, Larry," I replied, with feigned frustration, enjoying the game myself. "Did you turn the computer *on*?" The laughs from his classmates broadened his own smile.

Maybe this unthreatening clowning endears Larry to me, too, for despite the serious problems in his writing and my growing sense of my inability to help him address those problems, I enjoy working with him. Now, away from the stage that the class meetings provide him, we are still trading jokes as we focus on an especially troublesome passage in his draft.

"Do you see what's wrong with this sentence?" I ask him, pointing to a fragment in the passage that I had underlined.

"Yeah, it's too short," he says after a pause. And perhaps because we have been joking, Sophia and Gary chuckle. But it's no joke. That's his answer, and I am stunned.

"Larry!" I say, emphasizing my astonishment. "Too short?!"

"Yeah." But of course now he knows he is wrong.

"Look," I say, "'Go!' is a complete, grammatically correct sentence, and it contains a single word. Length has nothing to do with it."

"Really?" He says sheepishly, and although he is still smiling, he betrays concern of his own. He really didn't know that.

This impromptu lesson continues for another 45 or 50 minutes, during which I explain, with occasional help from Sophia, some of the other errors in his draft and learn more about his understanding of these errors—or lack of it. I realize that I should have had this conversation with Larry much earlier in the semester. In my commitment to help my students engage "theory" and explore the complexities of language in ways that Celina tries to do in her essay on Black English, I have overlooked serious problems in this one seemingly ordinary student that prevent him from engaging these complex issues of language in ways that I designed the class to facilitate. I am upset with myself and shocked by Larry's good-natured response to our session, even as the seriousness of his writing problems begins to come clear to him.

"You know," he says as we pack up our books and I begin to shut down the computers, "no one has ever pointed this stuff out to me, except one guy." He goes on to explain that among the several writing teachers he had at two community colleges he attended before coming to SUNY-Albany the previous semester, only one—an older, experienced faculty member at a nearby 2-year college—had spent any class time on what Larry calls "grammar."

"He was hard," Larry says, "but he made us do corrections. Other than that guy, no one paid any attention to my grammar."

I ask him how he did in these other writing classes, and he tells me he generally earned Bs. And when I ask him about other courses—not writing courses—he tells me the same thing. I am incredulous. He is struggling to maintain a C in my course, and that grade is largely a result of the fact that my grading scheme in the course rewards participation and completion of drafts.

"I always knew my grammar was bad, but it never really mattered much," he says.

But it's clear that he knows it does matter—not the "grammar" as such but what it reflects about his abilities as a writer: that he hasn't learned how to write in ways that the academy values, despite earning Bs in his courses. It seems to me that Larry's devil-may-care, class cut-up personality, whatever else it might say about him, masks the seriousness with which he approaches his academic writing and hides his deep worry that he isn't ready to be the successful citizen that he came to college to be. For Larry, literacy is a means to becoming that person, and as he prepares to graduate from college, he senses that literacy has become an obstacle rather than a vehicle to that goal.

Writing Competence and Writing a Competent Self

I share this story about Larry as a kind of counterbalance to my earlier story about Celina. Celina's struggles to negotiate among various discourse communities circumscribed by the tricky factors of race, gender, and class underscore my point about the complex connections between literacy and identity. In some ways, Celina's racial identity makes it easier to see those connections as she confronts the ways of writing and reading and speaking valued in the academic world. By contrast, Larry, on the surface, seems to be "mainstream" as that term tends to be used in professional discussions about literacy and education: He is White, male, ostensibly middle class. Yet it's clear that Larry's struggles as a writer—and the significance of those struggles in his life—involve more than his apparently "mainstream" identity. In that sense, he and Celina are engaged in the same complex struggle to write themselves into their world, although their struggles play out in very different ways.

For Larry, that struggle seemed to grow out of an ongoing effort—which he tends to characterize largely as unsuccessful—to establish himself as a competent person in school and in school-related venues such as sports. I won't offer a pseudo-psychological analysis to show the relationship between Larry's apparently conscious effort to set himself up as class clown and his sense of self-esteem, but in his writing Larry consistently dealt with issues of competence and self-esteem. (See Tobin, 1993, for a provocative discussion about the inherent "psychological" transaction that Tobin sees at the center of teaching writing.) In response to the first assignment for my class, a narrative about a significant school-related experience (the assignment for which Celina wrote about her mother), Larry wrote about the unfair and almost abusive treatment he received at the hands of his high school track coach, Mr. Farmer. Larry seems to have had some ability as a runner, but his essay includes relatively little discussion of the sport itself; rather, the essay focuses on how his coach viewed and treated him as a person. It raises issues of self-esteem that Larry would return to throughout the semester. In the following excerpt, the second paragraph of his first essay, those issues begin to emerge:

In most schools (from what I've heard) the class clown was placed on a voting list and the winner ended up on a Superlatives page, in the year book. I was a nominee but never a winner by any stretch of the imagination. During my junior year, I remember having a track coach by the name of Mr. Farmer.

Don't be fooled by the name though, he wasn't one for agriculture. He never bred plantlife, nor did he breed any decent runners, shotputters or discus throwers. He could run his feet as well as his mouth, however, he seemed to always be searching for "the right words" and never found them. I remember Mr. Farmer as being tall, slender and very aerodynamic (ie. he lacked hair). I also remember him as my Chemistry teacher. I lacked in the fundamentals in the math and science venues, as a matter of fact I still do. Whenever I received a sub-par grade on a test or a quiz I would use humor to raise my self esteem. I can't think of many teachers who appreciate the class clown and I can tell you Mr. Farmer (again not a real Farmer . . . no overalls) was one who didn't. Not on the track and not in chemistry class. I suppose it would be safe for me to say I enjoyed the two seasons I ran track, and if cohearsed I could utter the words "I liked chemistry", but as for Mr. Farmer there was little to like.

Some of the kinds of "grammar" problems that would so concern me later in the semester appear in this passage (for example, spelling and punctuation errors, run-ons), along with a lack of cohesion as Larry offers a somewhat random description of his former teacher. But what struck me—and pleased me—at the time as I looked over this first effort to write in my class is Larry's ability to engage me as a reader with his strong voice and his knack for turning a phrase. In addition, Larry displays an eye for detail and a sense of how to use detail effectively in his description of his teacher, and his wit suggests a sharp mind as well. Perhaps it was these qualities that led his other writing teachers—and me—to overlook some of the serious problems Larry had in his academic writing. But whatever the case, I was not troubled by those problems in this first essay; instead, I saw potential here. As a narrative, Larry's essay worked fairly well, in my estimation, and he raised what I thought were important issues about the authority of teachers, issues to be explored as we continued with the sequence of writing assignments.

But perhaps because I enjoyed the pleasant jokester that he was in class, I also overlooked the anger in Larry's voice in this first essay—anger that would characterize all his writing for the course. I discussed with him the issues of self-esteem as they emerged in his descriptions of the relationships between students and teachers and coaches, and I saw Larry trying to confront these issues in productive ways that would fit in well with my goals in that course. But I didn't hear his anger that I now see as growing out of his frustration—even years after the experiences about which he was writing—to be the person he wanted to

be. And that frustration, I now think, was two-pronged: frustration that he was never able to be the successful athlete and student—and person—that he wished to be, and frustration that was unable to write about his experiences in ways that are considered “successful” in an academic setting. Like my students in the prison writing class, Larry was implicitly told he was a failure as a person and explicitly told he was a failure as a student. No wonder he was angry.

At the time I neglected to see his writing—and his difficulties with his writing—as a function of his ongoing struggle to construct a self that could be deemed “successful” in academe and outside it. Rather, like Bizzell and Bartholomae and others who have helped us understand the difficulties students encounter when they enter academic discourse communities, I saw the problems in Larry’s essays as a result of his inexperience with academic writing and his lack of understanding and control of the conventions of academic discourse. I still think such a perspective was valid in helping me make sense of some of what I was seeing in Larry’s writing. But it wasn’t the whole picture.

For the second assignment, which asked students to discuss an issue that emerged from their first essay, Larry focused directly on the matter of self-esteem, and although this assignment called for a more measured academic voice, Larry’s anger is loud. The following passage is the second paragraph of his second essay:

We know what happens when someone tries and fails . . . that person may be considered to be a loser. And there often is no place on a team for the loser who tries. When high school competition is in question one must first look at the process in which the children are selected. There are the “try” -outs, which oddly enough in some schools is the only encouragement for trying. The children try to get on the team. I can remember being the last one picked in gym class to play basketball because I couldn’t make a basket if the hoop was the size of a manhole and the ball was a tennis ball. I was the last one picked and everyone knew who not to pass to. It was my teammates judgment, their assessment of my playing ability, that sidelined me. I might’ve had a bad day the first time I played; nevertheless, I was judged. The verdict was in and I was found guilty of being a poor player. This is how kids are judged outside of gym class in a more organized setting. All of the children are expected to perform as well as they can under an extreme amount of pressure. They’re all lined up and they’re judged. They’re judged by the coach and they’re judged by their peers. Behaviors toward

the kids that don’t make the team change and the behaviors within the those kids change. They may feel below average and subhuman. The “nanny, nanny, nah, nah” effect takes place at times. The “I made the team and you didn’t” breeds foul words and foul feelings. The child in essence can be placed upon a crucifix for their entire world to see. The children can feel embarrassed, beaten and hopeless. The coach can avoid such things by explaining that everyone has done well, however, only so many positions are available, and there are too many children who want them.

This second assignment did not call for a narrative, yet it seems that Larry is telling the same story of mistreatment and low self-esteem that he told in the narrative he wrote for the first assignment. He was to have discussed an issue or problem, but he quickly returns to *his* issue, *his* problem. And his essay becomes another effort to confront that problem and reclaim some sense of self-worth—very much as Hannah’s essay, which I discussed in Chapter 2, was about her belief in herself as a student who *can* succeed. He continues to try to construct a viable self within a set of discourses that define him as marginal.

For the third essay assignment, students were asked to read their classmates’ narratives from the first assignment and write what I called a “reflective analysis” in which they were to identify a key theme or problem that emerged from those essays and try to explain it. Even in the context of this assignment, which asked Larry to focus on other students’ essays directly, the same issues of self-esteem and mistreatment—and the same angry voice—are evident. In this case, Larry chose to discuss Celina’s essay about her mother and Gary’s essay about his experiences in New York City schools as a recent immigrant from Haiti. Interestingly, Larry, the White, middle-class male, chose to discuss the essays written by the only two Black students in the class. Yet he really doesn’t deal with issues of race as much as he deals with the same issues of self-worth that he himself confronted in his overwhelmingly White, rural high school. Here are extended excerpts from the essay (which was untitled):

What is education? What exactly does it entail? What are the job descriptions and obligations of the people who work within this system? Everyone has their own answers to these questions and their own definition of education. However, just like snowflakes there are never two that are exactly alike. In a blizzard of possible narrations, two students draw upon their

experiences to paint a picture of education for us. Unfortunately, the only colors used are that of black and white. Racism and ignorance are proving to be immortal creatures that continue to plague our society.

Gary and Celina both had discussed the issue of racism within the education system. Gary is in his twenty's and he hails from Haiti. His first white teacher also happened to be his first white contact in the United States. Her name was Mrs. Findley and she held the African American and the Haitian American students in low esteem. Then a very young Gary had an experience with her he will never soon forget.

It was apparent to Gary and other students that Mrs. Findley held something against her minority students. There was one day in particular that Gary recalls and his writing makes this scene vivid and proves to be an effective tool. Mrs. Findley used to wait until the last five minutes of class to post the homework assignment on the board. This may not seem problematic to those of us who are native to this country. However, Gary's native language isn't English and it took additional time to record the assignment to his notebook. As he copied the assignment down Mrs. Findley grew more and more impatient. On his way out of class he was grabbed by her and shoved into the wall. She was scolding him for taking too much time to copy the assignments. Instead of posting the assignments earlier she took her frustrations out on young Gary. He remembers crying, but he doesn't say how long he cried for. Perhaps from time to time he sheds a few tears while recalling Mrs. Findley. The fact is our teachers within the education system are trusted with the children to teach the information and to make sure they are protected within the time spent on campus. Gary wasn't being protected, if anything he became in danger while within reach of Mrs. Findley's grasp. It would appear that our trust as well as our minority students are being violated in today's schools. . . .

These are the years that are crucial to a child's development. This experience has scarred him for life. What business of the teacher is it to humiliate a child? Would Mrs. Findley have treated a white student with the same disrespect? Perhaps, perhaps not, it is Gary's opinion that she would not have. Can we afford racial conflicts in our schools? Can we afford to take the words of our children over that of a teacher? I ask you, can we afford not to?

Celina tells of her mother's experiences in a segregated Mississippi grade school. This story had taken place twenty years before Gary's experience with Mrs. Findley. The teachers in Celina's mother's school were poorly trained and unusually young. The black kids stayed with black kids and the white stayed with the white. The black children were forced to use books of yesterdays past. They were horribly outdated and decrepit. Celina's mother wasn't forced to sit in the back of the bus. As a matter of fact she wasn't allowed on the bus at all. This was a privilege reserved for the white children exclusively. Celina's mother remembers throwing rocks at the bus while it sped past filled with white children laughing at her.

It obviously was the opinion within the school board that it was okay that these children use inadequate facilities and tools to learn with. Gary and Celina's mother do not concur. . . .

What can we do? We can listen to our children with patient ears. We can create an environment within schools that are appropriate to learn within. It is obvious that over the years between the youth of a woman in her forties and the youth of a man in his twenties that this society hasn't hardly evolved at all. After twenty years, segregation is still actively encouraged. However, it isn't a physical segregation it is emotional and we should be ashamed.

It's worth noting here that the "grammar" problems that seemed to concern Larry later in the semester were largely absent from the passage taken from his second essay (above) but reappear in this third essay with a vengeance. I'd suggest that one reason for this is the difficulty Larry had in constructing and sustaining a conventional academic argument—a task he struggled with throughout the rest of the semester. But what strikes me about this essay is the way in which it continues—implicitly—to tell Larry's story of mistreatment and low self-esteem, and in that sense it can be seen as part of his ongoing struggle to construct through his writing a sense of identity that reclaims that self-esteem as a competent young White man about to leave college and enter the workaday world.

Self-Interest and Self-Worth

Larry's struggle, as personal as it clearly is, nevertheless must be understood within the context of the ways in which he is positioned by the discourses he is confronting as he engages in these acts of writ-

ing and reading: He is a “novice” within the discourses of academic writing and education reform, as those discourses are manifested in the reading and writing assignments I gave to the class and more broadly in the discussions within the popular media about education; he is a “student” in those same discourses; he is a “student athlete” within the broader discourses in our culture surrounding competitive sports and interscholastic athletics; he is a “male athlete” and a “young man” defined in specific ways within those same discourses and within other cultural discourses about gender. In short, like Mr. Green, whom I discussed in Chapter 3, Larry is positioned variously within all these discourses, and these various subject-positions shape his struggle to construct an identity that allows him some sense of self-worth. In other words, how Larry understands himself and these various circumstances that he describes (competing on a high school track team, for instance) is partly a function of these various, sometimes conflicting discourses that shape his sense of what it means to be a student, an athlete, a man, and a writer. What is striking to me is that in each case Larry seems somehow compromised and relatively powerless. He has rather marginal competence as a student writer, for example, and if we take him at his word, he seems not to have been successful as either a “student athlete” or a “young man” in high school. Yet the various discourses that position him in these roles inevitably shape his own sense of self. It’s an insidious kind of catch-22, in which he can adopt only roles that are available to him—that are constructed for him within these broader discourses—yet in adopting those roles, he is constructed as something less than competent.

In the previous chapter I argued that literacy must always be understood as “local” in the sense that each writer and reader engages the discourses in place in a specific situation in decidedly personal ways; I invoked the concept of *self-interest* to help explain this dynamic between the broad, inherently social and cultural discourses that we all encounter as we read and write and the idiosyncratic and unique individual writer and reader who is constructed through specific literate acts. Larry cannot escape those discourses that assign certain subject-positions to him, but he confronts those roles—and adopts or resists them—in ways that are mediated by his self-interest. If we could identify key aspects of that self-interest, we undoubtedly would include his prior experiences with teachers and coaches like Mr. Farmer; for Celina, we would focus on her experiences as a young African-American woman moving among several different community and institutional contexts, each of which values her race and language in different ways, and we would likely include her relationship with her mother, and so on. For

each student, these specific elements that can be said to be part of his or her self-interest are different. Yet the task facing each student is fundamentally similar: to write (and read) a way into those discourses and claim space for himself or herself. And my task, as their teacher, is to help them understand the complexities of written language and develop some measure of competence with it so that they might find viable—and satisfying—ways to write themselves into those discourses. That is a task that goes well beyond helping such students acquire some mastery over the conventions of writing in specific contexts.

In working with Larry I did not appreciate this. Although at the time I supported the arguments Larry tried to make in his essays and empathized with his sense of indignity and injustice, I did not understand the extent to which Larry’s writing in my class was all really about the same set of difficult and complex and personally troubling issues as he tried to write himself into discourses that defined him in complex and troubling ways. I am confident that I helped Larry become a better writer by helping him work through drafts of these essays in order to address the obvious “technical” problems of focus and organization and the frustrating grammatical mistakes; I am confident that I helped him understand better some of the conventions of academic writing and enabled him to make some small progress toward learning to use those conventions in sustaining academic arguments or analyses. And I think I helped him gain insight into the social and cultural nature of written discourse. But I’m not sure I helped Larry make any progress in his real project that semester: to construct an identity through his writing that would enable him to claim a sense of agency—one that encompasses a sense of confidence and self-worth—within the discourses of academe and of our culture more generally; to become fully human, in Freire’s sense of that term. The decisions Larry made about what and how he wrote in my class that semester were, I would argue, much more intimately a function of this project than they were of his inexperience with academic discourse or the intellectual challenges of the writing and reading tasks I was asking him to complete. In other words, I might have better understood those decisions—and the difficulties he had in his writing—had I been able to see his writing in terms of his effort to construct a viable self in his academic work.

As I write this chapter nearly 2 years after that semester ended, Larry’s self-evaluation, which I assigned as part of the required course portfolio, seems to underscore my inability, as his teacher, to appreciate his struggle to construct that self. In that self-evaluation, Larry

refers to the writing problems that frustrated him all semester: sentence structure, focus, organization—which he calls “the basic structure of writing.” He establishes the sober tone of that brief document in the very first line: “I have struggled all of this semester. I have struggled with sub-topics, and I have struggled with commas. As well as having an over-all struggle with computers.” I’m sure he did not intend the irony in that last sentence fragment. And then, without a hint of the humor that was so much a part of his classroom presence, he concedes that he did learn something as a result of his struggle with computer technology, the use of which he resisted all semester: “By the way I used computer applications like you showed me to reorganize my paper. Don’t feel like a total failure. I learned how to do that from you.” He encourages me not to feel like a failure, yet he implies that he does. Again.

His self-evaluation was thus one more part of the larger, inter-related set of texts through which he struggled to define himself as something other than a failure. In my obsession to help him understand writing as discourse, I didn’t see it. I didn’t see that his individual struggle to confront discourse was, for him, not about the discourse itself but about his place within it.

PERSONAL AGENCY AND POLITICAL EXISTENCE

The day’s mail brings, unexpectedly, an anonymous flyer, which begins,

NEIGHBORS, WE MUST BE VIGILANT!

Do we really need or want a high density housing area just west of Green Meadows?

Is there room for 230 houses on only 77 acres? . . .

To those living in Green Meadows, what happens to your water pressure and sewage?

What does the future hold?

I am one of the “neighbors” to whom this document is addressed, one of “those living in Green Meadows,” a subdivision some 2 miles outside of West Lafayette, Indiana, where Purdue University, my employer, is located. As I walk from the roadside mailbox back up the driveway to our house, I skim the flyer, then I read it again, more carefully. I am aware of plans for expanding this subdivision, a modest neighborhood of some

150 homes that has existed for nearly 50 years, but the numbers—230 new houses, 77 acres—are new to me. And they concern me. My wife, Cheryl, and I chose to live in this neighborhood for a variety of reasons, but we were especially attracted to the quiet, settled character of the subdivision, which suggested that we would not have to deal with rapid new construction of the kind we witnessed near our previous home in Ohio. Our choice was perhaps shaped mostly by the fact that this was our first house (we previously had rented), and we wanted it to be just the right place for our two school-aged boys and for us. The flyer’s tone of warning brings back all these considerations at once, a rush of thoughts that intensifies my reading. “WE MUST BE VIGILANT!”

If self-interest, as I have been using that term, uniquely shaped how Larry and Celina wrote their essays for my composition class, it just as surely shaped how I read that flyer. I read that text not only as a new homeowner, but as a husband, a father, a parent of schoolchildren, a taxpayer, a mortgage holder, a voter, a neighbor. Each of those roles—those subject-positions—is circumscribed by various discourses—economic, political, cultural, social. But those roles are mediated in terms of my self-interest—which encompasses my prior experiences as, say, a voter and taxpayer and renter and son of homeowners as well as my knowledge of matters like taxes and zoning and drainage. Those experiences and that knowledge, along with my broader beliefs about such things as development and private property (beliefs that are themselves a function of discourse) and my “skills” and experience as a reader (a literate person)—all these mediated my engagement with this text and thus shaped the way I made meaning of it. More important, my effort to make meaning of this text—to determine its meaning *for me*—represented an act that reflected a measure of agency on my part. That is, the meaning of this flyer was a function of the significance of that text, as I understood it, given the circumstances I have described. That meaning will change from reader to reader—as a function of each reader’s circumstances and self-interest—and thus is always *local*.

But that’s not the whole story. For literacy represents power only within broader economic, political, social, cultural, and institutional contexts within which it is assigned value. As Deborah Brandt (1998) reminds us, “Literacy, like land, is a valued commodity in this economy, a key resource in gaining profit and edge” (p. 169). In this sense, the flyer by itself is just a text; what I might *do* with it—beyond my act of “decoding” it—and what I *can* do with it within these broader contexts and within this particular situation make all the difference. I can, for example, throw it in the trash can, in which case the act of reading it

amounts to little more than decoding the words and does not necessarily represent the kind of potential empowerment that I have associated with literacy. Or I can show it to a neighbor and use it as a way to engage that neighbor in a discussion, which may include our collective decision making about some further act. That act may include attending one of the meetings to which the flyer refers, or it may include voting for or against the unnamed county commissioner in the next election, or it may mean making phone calls to "let everyone know that this area needs to remain as low-density and non-commercial," as the flyer suggests, or it may mean writing a letter to the county planning commission or to the local newspaper expressing opposition to the development. Any such act would be influenced by my prior act of reading that flyer, and in that sense my reading of it may represent the kind of Freirean empowerment that I believe literacy can be. As an experienced writer and reader who possesses a general understanding of matters that are important in this instance (mortgages, taxes, etc.), then, I do have some measure of potential power, circumscribed though that power ultimately may be.

Ideally, I want my students to acquire such power, too; I want literacy to represent a means of action in whatever situations they may confront that matter in their lives as much as the subdivision development mattered in mine. Student loan documents, rental agreements, employee tax forms, leases—such texts might intersect their lives in significant ways as the flyer intersected mine. How they read those texts—how they *can* read them—may determine what kind of action is possible for them in those situations. And in this sense, the kind of self-construction that I have described Celina and Larry engaging in through their academic writing must be seen, eventually, within the broader contexts of their literate lives outside the classroom. In other words, literacy represents an ultimately limited kind of empowerment for them if it is only about how they construct themselves in their academic papers. If those acts of self-construction cannot be extended beyond the classroom, to intersect with others in social and political and economic contexts, then their writing and reading, as important as they may be in helping them construct a sense of self, will not become a significant means by which they can act as citizens and voters, by which their self-construction can become meaningful in a social and political sense. Thus, literacy can represent empowerment for Celina and Larry only to the extent that they can use it to negotiate the challenges they face in their lives outside the classroom. Their self-construction in writing may always be local, but it will not always be school-sponsored (see Chapter 6).

Elsbeth Stuckey (1991) offers the depressing insight that literacy is "an economic and social regulation" (p. 19). The truth of her statement is evident—for me, at least—at a meeting I attend some months after the flyer appeared in my mailbox. The meeting has to do with the sale of some land adjacent to the subdivision that is owned by the corporate entity that operates the Green Meadows water system. As I sit on one of a few dozen folding chairs arranged in hasty rows in the brightly painted basement of a church a few blocks from my home, I try to understand the status of this entity—a nonprofit, nongovernmental corporation that has controlled the water system since its construction 45 or so years earlier. The three vaguely familiar 50-ish men sitting at the table in the front of the room politely answer questions posed by their neighbors. Everyone knows everyone else here. The friendly, air-conditioned atmosphere makes it easy to forget the oppressive summer heat outside and the seriousness of the matter at hand. Large placards with blueprints and information about the sale stand at either side of the table, and as they talk, the men distribute several handouts with more information—including statistics about tax assessments and land values—to the dozen or so of us sitting in front of them. Each attendee is asked to sign a list that is circulating among the rows. I imagine that this list will serve as documentation for the number of attendees that will be noted in the official minutes of the meeting. Little concern is expressed about the fact that this sale almost certainly will result in development of the land, which lies across a county road that forms the southern border of the subdivision and which is now a patchwork of open meadows and small woodlots where the neighborhood kids regularly play. Cheryl and I and our sons live directly across from that land, and we like the rural feel it gives to the neighborhood. I try to match the figures and maps on the handouts with that pleasant image of the meadows and woodlots and kids in my mind. And I listen to the casual talk of legal statutes and tax assessments and mortgage arrangements as I sit there.

Two years later we will sell that house and move to another state. By then, both subdivision developments—the one described in the flyer and the one discussed at the church basement meeting—are completed, or nearly so. A great deal of writing will have shaped that work, most of it invisible or inaccessible to the residents of the neighborhood. Dozens more homes will become part of the subdivision. Its settled character that so appealed to us when we bought the house will be changed. As we leave, we will carry with us dozens of complicated legal documents relating to the sale of our house and the purchase of

another—documents that reflect a bewildering complexity of discourses that assign us roles, that shape the meanings we make of them, that change the landscape of our lives.

I do not know what kinds of documents Celina and Larry will read and write as they confront important situations in their lives as students and citizens and voters and employees and tenants and property owners. But I know they will.

Chapter 5

Technology, Subjectivity, and Local Literacies

Technology, along with the issues that surround its use in reading- and writing-intensive classrooms, both physically and intellectually disrupts the ways in which we make meaning—the ways in which we communicate. Computers change the ways in which we read, construct, and interpret texts. In doing so, technology forces us to rethink what it means to be human.

—Cynthia L. Selfe and Susan Hilligoss,
Literacy and Computers

It seems to me to be fundamental for us today, whether we be mechanics or physicists, pedagogues or stonemasons, cabinetmakers or biologists, to adopt a critical, vigilant, scrutinizing attitude toward technology, without either demonizing it or "divinizing" it.

—Paulo Freire, *A Pedagogy of Hope*

In the eleventh week of the semester, Sammy posts the following message to the email list I have set up for a graduate course I am teaching at SUNY-Albany called "Literacy, Technology, and English Studies"¹:

From: Sammy
To: English 725
Subject: late

hello all. my commentary is going to be late, but i would like to share some things with you as to why.

on the one hand such sharing is a demand i suppose, and considering the medium and the context, an imposition. i have read imagologies once already, but i do want to, am reading it again, getting new hits i hadn't gotten before. the last few days have been dizzying to say the least: i've driven six hundred