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**In the Public I:  
Rhetoric and Subjectivity in First-Person Writing**

**by  
Wendy Ryden**

**A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.**

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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**In the Public I:  
Rhetoric and Subjectivity in First-Person Writing**

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## Introduction

“. . . the uses to which writers put language . . . by definition is never private.”

Sharon Crowley (33)

I am in Washington, D.C. sitting in on an MLA panel entitled “How I Teach Writing.” The session is well-attended as the presenters are heavyweights in the world of comp/rhet: David Bartholomae, David Bleich, John Schilb and Susan Miller. The thrust of the panel seems to be to defend the teaching of rhetoric over the teaching of composition. Each presenter does so admirably, discussing the need to teach and problematize discourse conventions. I’m impressed and at the same time reminded of a group of people who have gotten their story straight. They offer by now familiar critiques of expressivism and personal narrative, mostly along the lines of what John Trimbur summed up in his review essay “Taking the Social Turn: Teaching Writing Post Process”:

In an interesting inversion, at least some of the students in process classrooms proved to be better rhetoricians than their teachers. While their teachers were trying to evade what they believed to be the debilitating formalism of current-traditional rhetoric, the more sophisticated students were mastering a genre their teachers had failed to name. If process teachers were reading what they took to be a direct and unmediated prose of personal experience, the most successful students were hard at work constructing the

authorial persona of self-revelatory personal essays written in a decidedly non-academic style. . . . the irony of process pedagogy is that teachers' desire to operate outside oppressive institutions . . . only reinstated the rhetoric of the belletristic tradition. (110)

In order to answer the title question of the session, "how I teach writing," the panelists start with how they don't. John Schilb, for example, talks about the wrong way to respond to the student question: what does the teacher want in my writing? He quotes from a process article of yesteryear, in which a poor, misguided soul made a statement to the effect: I, the teacher, want you, the student, to want what will be satisfying and meaningful for you to want. Everybody in the house laughs knowingly. (I laugh, too, but it makes me a little uncomfortable. I get the feeling of a wolf attack, and I worry that I'm not really part of this club.) Schilb counters by saying that these (enlightened) days he tells students: I want your main assertion to appear in the first or second paragraph.

Susan Miller is emphatic that what she teaches in her classes is rhetoric. When, during the question time, a self-identified adjunct-instructor makes an interesting, elaborate (and yet to my mind at least) unfathomable statement about teachers fearing the chaos of student writing, Professor Miller makes short work of her: My students don't go to Ivy League schools and what they need is to learn the language of the academy . . .

When I leave the session, I feel bothered. I'm in sympathy with most of the critiques, and yet, what? What

comes to mind, oddly enough, is Wendy Wasserstein's play The Sisters Rozensweig, specifically when the character Nick Pym, stuffy, conservative British MP, closes a scene with the observation: "With the collapse of the Soviets, one wonders what the entire twentieth century has been for." I realize I have a similar feeling about the field of composition and rhetoric at the close of the twentieth century. If where we've ended up is with prescriptions such as, "I tell students to put their main point in the first paragraph," then what, I wonder, has the entire resurgence in the field been for?

\*\*\*

I am in Chicago attending a special interest group session, "Writing and Healing," at the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Charles Anderson and Marian MacCurdy, well-known for their work in this area, head the session. Peter Elbow, whose name has become almost synonymous with expressivist writing, is there, too, and he is lying supine on the floor in the front of the room because he is suffering from back spasms. Somehow it is a reminder, I think, of how composing is a grounded process: bodies do matter. I wonder if he writes about his back pain, as I know he must be aware of Pennebaker's work that shows writing about illness actually helps alleviate it. The leaders of the session talk about their work with writing and healing and invite the group to do some writing.

We are asked to write about a very happy moment and a very sad moment. We then talk about what we produce, noting things like the happy moments tend to be general descriptions of well-being whereas for many of us the sad moments are

often very specific, image-driven descriptions. Marian MacCurdy finds this very interesting and links this to the physiology of trauma and how traumatic memories are stored differently in the brain than other memories. During the conversation, the question comes up: how relevant/appropriate is it to do this kind of writing in a college setting? The answer seems to be that it may be inappropriate for freshman composition, but it is OK in advanced writing classes where students decide what to write about. The group insists on the importance of the emotional work that the personal narrative performs.

I leave feeling dissatisfied with those conclusions. Something about the answers strike me as too easy, and yet who could argue with Charles Anderson when he says that as a teacher, he must wait to be invited into the student's personal space? Fair enough. But what is personal, I wonder? Is there a student space that doesn't require an invitation, where it is OK to barge right in? How do we know which is which? Is teaching discourse conventions impersonal? What about the discourse conventions of the personal narrative?

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When I think about these two scenes, I realize why I wanted to write about the rhetoric of first-person narration: because I feel equally at home--and, I suppose, equally out of place--in both of the situations that I described. In the field of writing instruction, the public "I" of texts generates tensions and fealties that I both feel and share--and thus felt the need to explore. My aim in writing this dissertation is less to pick a side to be on and more to

understand the terms of the concerns that erupt around writing the first-person singular. At the heart of these debates I believe is the question of subjectivity; the textual construction and representation of the self. My dissertation "In the Public I" focuses on the subjectivities engendered in first-person writing, especially student writing, and the treatment of this subjectivity within the field of composition and rhetoric.

For me the above-mentioned conference scenes are representative of the richness as well as the limitations of the range of views regarding subjectivity and attitudes towards first-person writing, what often becomes identified as personal writing. Such writing has been and continues to be embraced, repudiated, qualified, and recuperated by various factions within writing studies. In order to understand why composing--or not composing--in the first-person can become a thorny issue, we need to consider the fact that writing teachers don't just deal with texts and dead authors; they deal with living students whose lives and selves are intricately bound up in the writing they produce. When you work with a student in a classroom face to face for fifteen weeks, observing the distinction between writer and text becomes a far more complex endeavor than it does in literary studies. It is easy enough simply to conflate the writer with the writing, make one an extension of the other, to begin to view the student text as a transparent representation of the student, especially when that text makes use of an "I," and to respond to both student and text accordingly. Under this scenario, what the student writes is who the student is and, importantly, who that student might

become. Composition, steeped in a pedagogical imperative, is concerned with development--the development of both texts and the writers that produce them.

Thus the relationship between text and writer is a foregrounded concern in writing instruction. Critics such as Trimbur cited above, working from post-process, post-structural insights, have brought attention to the epistemological difficulties that engulfed the early process movement's conceptions of student subjectivity in texts. The cognitivism and expressivism responsible for the growth of the field of composition and rhetoric relied in some cases on, what looks like today, a too-easy equation between student text and student, what Judith Summerfield refers to as the conflation of text and life, where the development of a person's writing was a measure of the development of the person--that is to say the person's attitudes, intellect, character. Indeed the benefit of writing instruction was (and is) often conceived of in terms of the benefit that accrues to the development of the writer via the process of writing. This is both the good news and the bad. For while this concern with the writer and her development ensures that composition and rhetoric is relevant to lived experience in a way that is sometimes obscured in other fields of study, this same concern can result in an oversimplification of the complex relationship that exists between the writer and the text. Part of what I will discuss in the ensuing chapters are the ramifications of that oversimplification, which include questions surrounding the public versus private nature of student first-person writing.

The emphasis on subjectivity and development embroils

the profession in some ethical concerns, particularly with regard to the dividing line between what counts as public and private knowledge in student writing, an area I flesh out more fully in Chapter One. But what constitutes a broader, overarching ethical issue is the policing of student subjectivity through the texts we elicit in the writing classroom. What kinds of selves are compelled through the writing assignments instructors give? What kind of people do we invite/require/expect our students to become through the writing we ask them to do, and how do students respond to that invitation/requirement/expectation? While the interjection of social constructionist and epistemic perspectives into composition theories brought attention to the ideologies of self at work in writing processes, such schools of thought are no less concerned with the writer's subjectivity. Rather these perspectives seem to be in competition with earlier ones over what kind of subjectivity writing instruction should be in the business of fostering.

Critics of expressivism, the pedagogy perhaps most closely associated with the production of personal narrative, have charged, for example, that the "I" of such texts is based on a particular construction of the individual, such as the "'freely' choosing competitive individual of capitalism" (Faigley 128). Current trends in scholarship have critiqued and complicated our understanding of this autonomous subject. Indeed social constructionism and epistemic rhetoric promote an understanding of language as central to just such constructions as well as a view of "knowledge as an arena of ideological conflict" (Berlin 489). Nonetheless, such approaches are equally, if more self-consciously,

constitutive of identity and concerned with the development of the writer. Kenneth Dowst notes this connection when, in "The Epistemic Approach," he explains that "language, then, seems not only to reflect but in part to determine what we know, what we can do, and in a sense who we are" (69) [emphasis added].

The turn towards rhetoric in writing studies has similarly shed light on the question of subjectivity in first-person writing, allowing for an understanding of textual identity as rhetorical performance. Such a view implies an understanding of an audience for which writers perform in the role of a public "I" to various effects and purposes. From this perspective, first-person student narrations may look very different than if they are viewed as mere transcriptions of experience or solely as psychological portraits of the writer. As Summerfield tells us, "The 'personal self' presented to us on the interviewer's couch, in the student paper, needs to be read as performance" (167). This dissertation considers the impact of such a "reading" on the way writing teachers receive and respond to the "personal" information that students deploy in their writing.

I use quotation marks around the word "personal" because I believe this adjective is not one to be taken for granted. In fact, the definition of personal is where this dissertation begins. Chapter One, "Nothing Personal?," locates the debate surrounding the place of "personal" writing in the college composition class within larger cultural boundaries of public and private. In order to understand how these boundaries effect writing in the composition class, I review testimony from the Hatch

Amendment (Protection of Pupil Rights) hearings to determine what perceptions of public and private knowledge are at work with respect to attitudes about public education. These same attitudes reappear in higher education debates on the subject of privacy, where teachers worry that being the recipients of students' personal writing puts them in the position of acting as pseudo-psychiatrists. Through analysis of exchanges that take place in College English regarding this issue, I examine the cultural criteria invoked by teachers to determine what knowledge is considered personal and what agendas are at stake in those determinations. Therapeutic discourse has tended to colonize that which we understand as personal, but I suggest that a more expansive rhetoric of performance offers additional ways to account for the public use of personal narrative.

My examination of composition's treatment of subjectivity continues as I next consider how, in the genre of the literacy and education narrative, a type of personal narrative common to the college writing class, students enact the stories of their relationship to reading and writing and learning in general. In Chapter Two, "Composing Literacy," I examine the way representations of personal knowledge intersect with representations of literacy and how composition's interest in student subjectivity and development affect those representations. (Mary Soliday maintains, for example, that the successful story of literacy is marked by a "distance between an earlier and a present self, (514)" creating a subject position consistent with an essayistic aesthetic of reflection and contemplation.) While literacy narratives are often credited with a potential for

fostering cultural criticism through reflection on experience, such an outcome is often precluded for students as they craft representations of themselves and their experiences to conform to a prevailing cultural myth of literacy. Using Frederick Douglass's Narrative as a kind of seminal literacy tale, I discuss how the Narrative is often understood (incompletely, I argue) by teachers and students alike as a progressive narrative of development that equates education and literacy acquisition with unqualified empowerment and liberation. Considering how Douglass's critical conception of literacy is readily absorbed by the dominant literacy myth provides a glimpse into how students experience requests to write their own literacy narratives. I consider student texts and their first person personae that both conform and resist prevailing discourses of education, literacy, and empowerment.

Chapter Two also discusses the personal narrative's potential to exceed the boundaries of private knowledge and fulfill the more public function of cultural criticism. I continue this discussion in Chapter Three in relation to writing and healing. "Confessional Healing?" begins by reviewing the ongoing interest in writing and healing and the pertinence of subjectivity to the healing personal narrative. Sensitive to critiques allying the healing power of rhetoric with confessional talk show culture, scholars such as Laura Gray-Rosendale attempt to recuperate the therapeutic narrative through a social-constructivist lens, arguing that students can rewrite the larger cultural narratives by which their experiences are often interpellated. Through my own work with conducting writing workshops for cancer patients

and their families, I consider the question of audience as an undertheorized aspect of much "writing to heal" scholarship and argue that attention to audience is important in determining the nature of the cultural work that such narratives perform.

I conclude my dissertation by returning to college writing and using a new lens, kitsch theory, to help explain the subjectivity of student personal narratives. In Chapter Four, "Comp, Kitsch, Cliché: Bourgeois Realism in the Writing Classroom," I assert that writing instruction's concern with humanistic development has resulted in an aesthetic of kitsch that influences both the production of student texts and teachers' reception of those texts. By invoking theorists of kitsch such as Milan Kundera, Aleksa Celebonovic, and Celeste Olalquiaga, I provide an alternative interpretive frame through which to understand the reception of the personal in the college classroom as well as the pedagogies that help shape this construction of personal. Kitsch, I suggest, is another discourse governing subjectivity. In particular relying on Olalquiaga's complication of the general understanding of kitsch as "fake art," I discuss two types of kitsch aesthetics, nostalgic and melancholic, as operating in writing and literature classes. The clash of melancholy and nostalgia, in complex ways connected to issues of social class, accounts in part for the moralizing tendency with which we read student and other narratives. Kitsch also sheds light on instructors' and students' differing expectations about writing for the classroom.

"In the Public I: Rhetoric and Subjectivity in First-Person Writing" is a multi-faceted exploration of subject

positioning in personal narrative and a consideration of the discourses through which such narrative functions. This dissertation does not attempt to resolve the long-standing debate on personal writing that exists in the field of composition and rhetoric. Rather it seeks instead to reconfigure that debate by analyzing the terms of its framing. In so doing, I hope to contribute to an enhanced understanding of the rhetoric of personal narrative, especially its place in writing instruction.

Chapter 1  
Nothing Personal?

*entry from dissertation journal:*

*Before i fell asleep last night, i remembered the student whose wife died of cancer. i don't recall his name. i remember the course, though: a summer session for engineers on the 20th century European novel. Today i check my files. No trace of any rosters that might remind me who the student was--it's too long ago for me to have kept anything like that. But i find the syllabus:*

*"The upheaval of 20th century Europe has influenced the outlook of central European writers whose works often portray existence and human endeavors as evil, or, worse, devoid of meaning altogether. How do we bear such a condition? How do we find purpose and satisfaction in a world that is fundamentally meaningless? In this course we will look at novels which address these questions and consider the role and dilemma of the individual, especially the artist or intellectual, in relation to modern society."*

*(It's clear to me that the questions are rhetorical, even disingenuous, in the sense that i didn't expect students to ask, let alone answer, these questions in relation to their own lives. In other words, i never thought of these questions as "personal." And in hindsight reading them, i think to myself: how could i not have seen them as personal? i must confess after all that i love this literature. i don't feel detached from it. i experience the questions the writers pose as real questions--not just intellectual or historical curiosities. i focused a lot on the continental novel emerging out of World War II: the moral and*

*ethical questions that emerge from a world turned inside out; when the unthinkable has happened, how does the individual go on? i loved most of these books , and i loved teaching the course--but i never thought of that love as "personal.")*

*But did the students know that? i try to recall the student whose name i don't remember: a man in his mid-thirties, black (why these details)--he tracked me down while i was trying to have dinner in the school pub the first day of classes. The class was filled; he wanted in. i remember being annoyed, but he was very polite, apologized for interrupting the meal. i reluctantly signed him in to the too large class.*

*It was a good decision. He turned out to be smart, affable, engaged and critical but pleasant. He was friendly with some of the other older men, older than me, who also seemed taken with the novels we were reading--who seemed to be feeling that same kind of impersonal love that I did.*

*One day this same student comes up to me before class to tell me he probably won't be saying much that day. Ah, because you don't feel well, i assumed. That wasn't it. No, he asked if we could speak outside. Reading this material (what were we reading that day?) is too much for him. It reminds him of feelings he can't deal with, helplessness, despair. He doesn't think he'll be able to stay in class. You see, he finally tells me with some difficulty, last year, his wife, who had cancer, died. He's not sure he'll be able to finish the work for this class, and he thinks maybe he should drop the course.*

*i remember feeling surprised, I don't know why, to think about him as having been married at all, and then thinking how horrible--a man in his mid-thirties, to have that happen. (But it's now in present time that i start to wonder about my own story--how my mother had died unexpectedly a few years earlier from cancer, how that event might have informed my impersonal love affair with European novels . . . )*

*What did i say to him? Nothing like this has ever happened to me before. i say i'm sorry about your wife. Try to do what you can. In my mind i think i focus on how it would be a mistake for him to drop the course and not get credit for it. He's one of the best students. He's already done enough work for me to give him an A. Stay with it, i tell him, see how it goes. My response is inadequate. i'm somewhat perfunctory, maybe i even come across as cold. i don't know. i worry and feel bad about this for some time after-- not that i didn't respond well as a teacher, but that i didn't respond well as a human being. Ten years have passed since then. i'm older. i would be better at it, i think, if the same thing were to happen today. But would i? i would maybe respond differently--would it be "better"?*

*He didn't leave the class, nor the course. He stayed, and he seemed to listen even more intensely to the discussion that day. Never did we talk about anything besides what was in the books--but what does that mean? Never did anyone speak of anything in relation to their personal lives. i didn't ask anyone to write about a personal experience that made them feel the way the*

*characters did. i think i did try to get people to imagine what it was like to have everything you believed in or took for granted turned upside down. How does one live after that? But all the moral and ethical questions were framed in terms of the novels. No one testified. i never thought it was personal, or at least not unacceptably so. i never felt like i crossed any lines-- or even that i was walking any.*

*The day of the final exam. . . the man who thought he wouldn't be able to stay had managed to stay. With his final exam and paper, he turned in a letter. The letter stated he was glad he hadn't dropped the course. It had helped him, thinking about these books and the questions they posed, to think about his own questions. He wanted me to know this.*

*Why did he want me to know this? Certainly i was glad to know it, touched by it, and why was that? What business was it of mine, i was just the teacher, this was just a class, and why should i take any pleasure in his cathartic experience? Why should he want to tell me and why should i be so happy to know? The answer is obvious enough from my end: it made me feel like the course i taught was worthwhile, a good thing. When you think about it, what is the point of teaching literature to engineering students, if not for the possibility that something like this might happen? He must have used his personal pain to help him understand the literature, but he also used the literature to help him understand his personal pain. A good old-fashioned reason for reading.*

*But why did he want me to know? Had i, or the course, become his therapist? Is that bad, if i had? And must i resort to that analogy to explain the need for one person to tell another something about himself?*

*So what was in it for him? To please me or to blackmail me emotionally to get a good grade? Always possibilities and noble reasons but unnecessary in this case. The answer is so obvious that it's impossible to explain. To demystify it is to ruin; rob it of its implicit meaning; it is to turn it into something banal or saccharine. I'll let it go at that.*

*important question: in all of this, did the student learn only about himself? Was the social sacrificed to the personal? I think the answer is no.*

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. . .the schools have become vehicles for a heresy that rejects the idea of education as the acquisition of knowledge and skills and instead regards the fundamental task of education as therapy. . . . such inquiring into attitudes, beliefs, and psychic and emotional problems is a serious invasion of privacy.

Phyllis Schlafly (13)

In the sense that the intimate and public spheres are coconstitutive, writing is, historically, very much on the order of police work.

Michael Hill (137)

A pervasive fear in the field of writing instruction, and perhaps in education in general, is that instructors might become therapists. It is a fear held not only by the likes of Phyllis Schlafly and Senator Hayakawa, but by teachers who come from more progressive camps influenced by the educational theories of Vygotsky, Dewey, and Freire; theories that result in the student-centered pedagogy that we might imagine Phyllis Schlafly decrying as another slip down the ladder of civilization. While I suspect most liberal educators would dismiss Schlafly's proclamations out of hand, they nonetheless share her concerns about violating privacy and crossing the lines into therapy in their educational practices. From The Chronicle of Higher Education, we see, in an article entitled "Requiring Students to Write about Their Own Lives," an opening remark that is reminiscent of Schlafly's hyperbole:

Imagine a university professor asking a student to reveal in class the most intimate details of a childhood trauma like sexual or physical abuse. We would all agree that such behavior would be shockingly unprofessional. And yet, every day in

college classrooms and faculty offices across the country, students receive writing assignments requiring inappropriate self-revelation.

(Swartzlander et al.1)

In the case of writing instruction, this concern is particularly apparent, given some of the dominant directions that the the burgeoning academic field of composition and rhetoric has taken. The shift from classical invention strategies to include the domain of personal experience and the emergence of the process movement as a prevailing discourse have, more than ever, it seems, placed writing in, what I would call, the paradox of a "competitive alliance" with many therapeutic practices. In other words, between the discourses of therapy and writing instruction there exist parallels that cause the two fields simultaneously to complement and yet compete with one another. Both, I believe, are steeped in the same cultural milieu that values and emphasizes personality and interiority. Both, in many ways, are predicated upon this understanding of self and subjectivity and continue to participate in the cultural re-creation of these constructs.

I think an important component in the development of the parallels is connected to the evolving relationship of public to private knowledge. The writing classroom is a place where the cultural limits of personal and public often meet and sometimes clash. Thus the writing classroom and its practices are one of the educational areas that most evoke the fears of Phyllis Schlafly as well as those on the opposite end of the political spectrum about this question of therapy and violation of privacy. The long-standing debate

in the field of composition about the place of the personal in the writing classroom often elicits the anxiety of teachers becoming therapists. Regardless of whether one is more or less comfortable with "personal" or "private" writing assignments, there tends to be general consensus that we writing teachers are not, must not be, therapists. But despite this disclaimer, writing instruction and therapy frequently dip into the same rhetoric of self-actualization to describe their purposes and over-arching missions. The practice and scholarship of composition often rely on models of change and growth that mirror the healing and development paradigms of humanistic therapy and counseling. It is no coincidence, then, that counselors and self-help guides recommend writing as a tool of discovery and resolution; growth and achievement. Progressive pedagogies of writing have advanced the same agendas, despite some denials to the contrary. What interests me is the need, sometimes ferocious, that many writing teachers feel to disavow the therapeutic role of writing in the classroom. Why should this issue be a point of contention? Sometimes I find myself getting frustrated with people in both camps--with those who see writing as a perfunctory skill which can be taught without considering the person who writes and with those who sentimentalize the human experience they encounter in the writing classroom. But mostly I find myself interested in and wondering about how the lines get drawn in this debate and the way social understandings of the personal offer new ways to reconceive the dispute.

While, as Robert Connors ("Personal") has demonstrated, the issue of the appropriateness of personal writing

assignments precedes our contemporary context--that is to say it exists as a concern prior to composition's and rhetoric's "second wave"--an immediate source of the confluence between therapy and writing can be located in the cognitivism and expressivism that helped spawn the presently constituted academic field of composition studies. Both strands of influence focused on the development and composing process of the individual writer, even while invoking theories of collaboration that located the writer in the limited social context of the classroom. And for this emphasis, both schools have been roundly criticized, beginning perhaps most notably with James Berlin, for their neglect of the political economy of the writing self. It is tautological I suppose to say that writing instruction has focused in large part on the development of the writing agent. But I think it is necessary to articulate that assumption in order to understand how writing instruction penetrates therapy's domain and implicates itself in issues of privacy violation.

Despite any epistemological omissions in their early incarnations, cognitivism and expressivism, to use Berlin's terms, nonetheless certainly contributed to the so-called paradigm shift, the emphasis of process over product, that Maxine Hairston in "The Winds of Change" famously identified as having occurred, at least in theory, in the field. In my experience, the call to see writing as process often is, in practice, interpreted as a linear model of development where writers steadily "improve," both individual essays and their overall intellectual abilities, in their attempts to revise--this, despite early work in composing theory that clearly understood composing as "recursive" (Perl). "Improvement,"

in the sense of maturing thinking and evolving subjectivity, is, I think, one of the ties that binds writing and writing instruction to the therapeutic agenda. The connection is highlighted in William F. Irscher's assertion, written in 1979 in College Composition and Communication, that writing is "a process of growing and maturing, . . . a way of promoting the higher intellectual development of the individual" (241-42). Nearly a decade after Irscher made his statement, Robert Brooke reiterates, with the benefit of hindsight, the sense of that earlier point: "The entire 'process, not product' revolution can be seen as a change of focus from results to behaviors, from texts to people--in its best forms, the goal is to teach people to be writers, not to produce good texts in the course of a semester" (38).

Such statements, with their emphases on "growth" and subjectivity (made in counterpoint to "skills-based" views of writing), mirror, perhaps even mimic, the language of post World War II psychological modalities, especially the humanistic theories of personality development and their models of self-actualization. These theories, inspired by Abraham Maslow and popularized most notably by Carl Rogers, coexist historically with the rise of composition as an academic field. Indeed, composition theorists began citing Rogers's ideas, in particular, as an influence on their thinking in reconceiving rhetoric and argument. In their textbook Rhetoric: Discovery and Change, published in 1970, Young, Becker and Pike put forward an alternative rhetoric steeped in Rogerian principles, advocating that "rather than trying immediately to . . . refute their opponents, writers should first undertake a task similar to that of the Rogerian

psychotherapist" (Brent 76). In 1976, Maxine Hairston wrote "Carl Rogers' Alternative to Traditional Rhetoric," one of the many articles on this subject that began appearing in journals and collections, including evaluations and reassessments of what Rogers's ideas held for the future of composition. In particular, feminists objected to the self-effacement that a Rogerian ethos calls for in its tenets of suspending judgment and entering into full and unqualified understanding of another's position. For some, this sounds too much like traditional "women's work" of listening and facilitating social interactions. And yet, despite, for example, Catherine Lamb's specific objections in this regard, her theory of rhetorical negotiation for the classroom seems to owe a great debt to Rogerian precepts. Likewise, I would characterize the "invitational argument" of Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin as a feminist rhetoric that is part of the Rogerian legacy.

In Philip Cushman's summary of humanistic psychology, it is easy to see parallel motives and methods between this movement and the field of composition:

Humanistic psychology started as a rebellion against what it characterized as the mechanistic, impersonal, formalized, hierarchical, elitist psychoanalytic establishment and against an overly scientific, cold, removed behaviorism. With its roots in the values of existentialism, humanism, and the liberation movements of the 1960's, humanistic psychology developed a four point philosophical platform that focused on the experiencing person and emphasized choice,

valuation, self-realization, and the development of individual human potential and uniqueness. (55)

Compare this assessment with a passage from Ann Berthoff's "The Intelligent Eye and the Thinking Hand," in which she references William James's disparaging phrase the "brass instrument psychologists." In decrying the influence of positivism on composition studies, Berthoff writes,

The new brass instrument psychologists, like the old, are concerned with what can be factored, plotted, and quantified, and that does not include the things we want to know about--the composing process or the writer's mind or modes of learning and their relationship to kinds of writing. (41)

In its turn away from positivism, the process movement in composition began to tread a similar path to humanistic psychology in its treatment of the subject. This parallel is further underscored when we consider the influence of such epistemologies as Michael Polanyi's "tacit knowing," in which the demarcation between "inner" and "outer" knowledge is blurred, itself a reaction against the domination of positivism: "All tacit knowing," Polanyi tells us, "requires the continued participation of the knower, and a measure of personal participation is intrinsic therefore to all knowledge. . . ." (152).

But such philosophies, along with the process movement and its focus on development and growth, are, I believe, impossible to conceive of without taking into account the larger cultural shifts that have occurred around public and private spheres. A process movement that inextricably links the written product to the writer's process is enabled

through a valuing of personal knowledge as public. The same might be said of the rise of, for example, self-help therapies and call-in radio shows that have so saturated and influenced our common awareness. These phenomena make a kind of collective sense when considered against a backdrop of the public performance of the personal. Julie Ellison points to the pervasiveness of what I'll call the "public personal" when she explains that

the current revival of feeling so pronounced in our political and popular cultures as well as in academic fields was made possible by the postwar legitimation of the first-person voice.

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Anonymous, in confessional poetry, and in therapy made emotion public while maintaining its intensely personal character. (356)

But interest in the personal has a longer history that has led to its current legitimated status. In composition, the shifting terrain of public and private allows not only the writer's process but also the writer's experience to become valid areas of exploration. Personal and meta-personal narrations as well as other autobiographical writings find their place in the classroom at least in part as a result of an increase in public interest in the personal. Robert J. Connors for one describes the shift from "objective" invention in classical rhetoric to the accommodation of the "personal" in modern composition as one that takes place against a changing conception of public knowledge ("Personal"). Connors explains that the romantic understanding of the personal as a valid center of knowledge

is inimical to Greco-Roman conceptions of rhetoric that extended their influence well into the nineteenth century of the American tradition of writing instruction. The personal narrative of today would have been completely alien to any Greek rhetorical instruction, according to Connors, and any system of instruction based on it. But because "outward directed investigation" (167) that assumed a common body of cultural knowledge was no longer viable in a non-elite educational system, we see the emergence of a contested but recognized shift to the personal as a legitimate province of invention.

From Connors we see that the debate about personal writing extends at least as far back as the 19th century in America and is connected to an evolving view of public education. But while Connors posits a cause and effect relationship between a changing student population and conceptions of knowledge, the phenomenon he describes might be more comprehensively understood in terms of the Western cultural trajectory that increasingly focuses attention on the so-called personal, a trajectory that begins in the Renaissance and is equivalent in many instances to the modern development of the self. But the romanticism of the nineteenth to twentieth centuries alone shows a broader spectrum of influence on this question than the socio-economic class of the student population that Connors is considering. Progressive educators, for example, from Pestalozzi to Froebel to Montessori to Dewey were emphasizing the need to understand and educate the whole person; the importance of personality within the educational process. Beyond educational circles, there existed a fascination with

the personal, so much so, Donald Reiman reminds us in his consideration of the "public, confidential and private" aspects of texts, that "private" documents and correspondences were composed with an understanding (or hope) that they might become post-humously public records. Interestingly, Reiman, a textual scholar concerned with extant manuscripts, notes that an increased interest in the personal is accompanied by an intensified interest in writing process, and he relates both phenomena to a lessening cultural dependency on divine order:

The increase in the survival of a variety of manuscript records . . . reflects the new sense that life and truth reside in process rather than simply in its static, completed product. The less authority society granted to an immutable Divine order or to an unchanging Reason, the more likely were people to take an interest in tracing the personal growth of remarkable individuals and in the development of their own ideas and those of others under the guidance of their private experience.(18)

Reiman also suggests that the link between "the growing cult of the personal" and the interest in writing process is connected to technological factors, such as an increase in cheap paper that allows for the proliferation of diaries and daybooks, as well as a postal service that facilitated personal letter writing (24).

It is in this same public/private stew that the protean field of psychology, especially psychoanalysis, is taking shape to emerge and eventually exert the powerful influence

that led to "the triumph of the therapeutic" (Reiff). Over the last century, according to Philip Cushman, in Europe and America "psychological discourse has described the shape of the private and provided a rationale for gaining entrance into it" resulting in "far ranging political implications both for the field of psychotherapy and for society as a whole" (22). Viewed from this perspective, the *Zeitgeist* that has allowed therapeutic discourse to become a vital part of the public understanding also informs writing instruction's use of the personal. Indeed, "the growing hegemony of the therapeutic in twentieth century America, the complex and multi-layered relationship between politics and 'personal growth' that has come to dominate our time" (Cushman 35) is implicated in the legitimation of the personal as a source and subject of inquiry in and outside of the field of composition. Given the ubiquity of the psychological and the therapeutic as modes of human understanding in the twentieth century and their promotion of public interest in examining the personal, it might be *through* the cultural force of psychological discourse that the personal has in part gained its validation in the field of writing instruction. And if this is so, then any cultural backlash against the prevalence of psychological discourse might be felt in the field of writing as a repudiation of the personal and the private.

For better or worse, the emphasis on the personal has not diminished in the latter part of the twentieth century-- it has increased, even as there may be grumblings against it from a variety of quarters. As both entertainment and political instruments, confession and testimony, for example,

have become increasingly important genres as this century ends and the twenty-first begins. Of course second wave feminism was a major player in (as well as beneficiary of) the making of the private public into an overtly political and positive empowering strategy, and it is interesting to note how composition's renaissance coincided with this. Indeed much of the feminist work in composition, particularly with regard to personal narrative, has acknowledged the overlapping of agendas (see Caywood and Overing; Flynn; and Frey, for example). What becomes clear is that the aesthetic and ethic of the public personal bleeds (perhaps hemorrhages) into many areas and is not contained by the disciplinary boundary of psychotherapy. But there is resistance to as well as acceptance of this bleeding, and this state of confusion seems to be an important part of the debate about what constitutes appropriate public/private disclosure in the classroom. For, based on published responses to this very issue, I conclude that there are two threads that run through the on-going "personal" writing debate: one, whether "personal" writing assignments actually help students write "better" (a dispute that often evolves around questions of "academic discourse" and tautological definitions about what "better" writing is); two, whether it is ethically correct to base writing instruction on personal disclosure. The two threads do not mutually exclude each other within the controversies, but it is the second one that I will focus on now as being connected to the issue of public and private boundaries and to determine to what extent the permeability of those boundaries affects the sense of ethics and position of expertise of writing teachers.

### The Hatch Amendment Hearings

I will begin by looking at the issues of privacy and education that were brought to the fore in the mid 1980s during the fracas surrounding the Hatch Amendment, or what was officially known as the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment to the General Education Provisions Act, passed by Congress in the late 1970s. The issues raised with regard to the Amendment deal specifically with public schools from kindergarten through high school--not undergraduate curriculum. While my subject of discussion is the adult venues of college writing and English classes, I find the issues raised about privacy in the public schools to be relevant beyond that particular domain, especially with regard to what constituted inappropriate incursion into privacy and attitudes toward psychology and therapy, irrespective of the students' status as minors. One of the striking features of the hearings, as Gannett has noted, is the extent to which parents are mentioned. Though the hearings were ostensibly about "pupil rights," it seems "parent rights" were a foregrounded concern. Parent rights obviously become less important when we enter the more adult arena of college, although this issue by no means completely disappears. Although most college students are no longer legally minors, many are far from completely emancipated, in the many senses of that word, from their parents. While it is important to exercise caution in comparing public schools to college environments, I find many of the issues raised in the testimony at the hearings echo discussions of college

writing teachers on this same topic, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter.

Indeed the hearings had a direct impact on thinking about writing instruction at all levels due to the emphasis on journal writing that repeatedly surfaced in the testimony. In the wake of these hearings, the National Council for the Teachers of English tacitly acknowledged the embroilment of the profession in an ethical issue of privacy by subsequently publishing Toby Fulwiler's "Guidelines for Using Journals in School Settings." Fulwiler's document attempts to balance the scales of public intrusion into private lives in school assignments and, in so doing, protect what has become an important staple of process writing pedagogy: the use of a classroom journal. The guidelines call for teachers to distinguish between diaries and journals, the latter focusing on course content, and to make sure that personal writing is actively integrated with curriculum. The guidelines also recommend that grades not be given for journals. For my purposes here, it is important to look at the public attitudes that prompted the need for Fulwiler's pamphlet as well as the Hatch Amendment hearings themselves.

Phyllis Schlafly, in her book Child Abuse in the Classroom, sums up the provisions of the Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment<sup>1</sup> as follows:

that no student shall be required (under any federal program)--without prior written parental consent-- to submit to psychiatric or psychological examination, testing, or treatment in which the primary purpose is to reveal information about  
(1) political affiliations,

- (2) mental and psychological problems potentially embarrassing to the student or his family,
- (3) sex behavior and attitudes,
- (4) illegal, anti-social, and self-incriminating behavior,
- (5) critical appraisals of members of the child's family,
- (6) legally privileged relationships, such as those of lawyers, physicians and ministers, or
- (7) income (except to determine eligibility for financial assistance). (15-16)

According to Schlafly, the Hatch Amendment Hearings were held in 1984 to appease concerned groups and individuals who felt the statute was being ignored by public school administrators. During the hearings, public testimony was given about the perceived classroom abuses that were occurring. Schlafly's book is mostly a reprinting of citizens' testimony, along with her introduction where she makes the charge that "psychological treatment" and "therapy" (17) have replaced traditional education defined as "basic knowledge and skills." In her words: "cognitive education (which addresses the child's intellect, and teaches knowledge and skills)" has been replaced with "affective education (which addresses the child's feelings and attitudes, and spends classroom time on psychological games and probing personal questionnaires)" (13).

From Schlafly's remarks and the reprinted testimony, some themes begin to emerge that shed light on the definitions of privacy and therapy that are at work in the criticisms of the public schools. One theme is the general

attitude toward what constitutes "therapy" or "psychological treatment": these ideas are paradoxically regarded with simultaneous suspicion, awe, and trivialization. It becomes apparent that the therapy that people fear is occurring at the expense of true education is regarded with distrust and imputed with a power to control minds. Anna Mayer, for instance, credits the teachers with employing "mind-bending techniques" (188) and Donna Muldrew fears that teachers are instilling group values over individual values (191). Steven Broadhy worries about "Skinnerian tactics" that don't respect the individual's feelings (185). Despite this perceived power on the part of the teachers to corrupt the minds of the school children, there are, nonetheless, many charges of ineptitude with regard to using said mind-bending techniques. Mary Jane Stanley asserts that "just as no one is made a professional cook by knowing how to operate a can opener and turning on a burner, no one is made a professional psychologist or therapist by taking a few college courses in psychology and probing a class with canned psychological questions" (181). Shirley Whitlock claims that having a student write in a journal "puts the teacher in the position of psychotherapist" and argues that "the writing of the problems does not guarantee that the child has the maturity to deal with them. This psychotherapy technique is being used by amateurs, namely, teachers. This can create problems for the child where no solutions are offered" (227-28). On the one hand testifiers worry that the "therapy" is too effective in changing children's values and on the other hand that it is not effective enough because it is not administered by professionals.

This contradiction is indicative of the success of the professionalization that psychology has achieved as a discipline within American society. In the testimony offered, the psychotherapist, the doctor of the mind, and his techniques are afforded the same mystified potency attributed to the medical doctor of the body. This is no accident. As Vandebos, Cummings, and Deleon conclude in their assessment of the state of psychotherapy,

Economic factors, such as government support and insurance reimbursement, have played a major role in making psychotherapy a viable social enterprise and profession. Essential to the continuing acceptance of the role, value, and contribution of psychotherapy and psychotherapists is public awareness and political advocacy. It is vital that high school and college students learn about personality development, psychological growth, behavioral change, and so forth, so that they are informed about what is possible and can avail themselves of appropriate services when needed. . . . It is essential that psychotherapists remain involved in public policy formation. (97)

The phenomenon of psychotherapy, then, has become a familiar enough feature of the American cultural lexicon that lay people feel able to have opinions about and respond to it. But the testimony suggests that within this acceptance is also a distrust, an uncertainty, about the project of what is labeled psychology and therapy and the perceived intrusion into lives. Education that is understood as derivative of

such therapy would also raise suspicions and be lumped into the camp of privacy invasion. Although much of the testimony reads over the top in its conspiratorial tones about the therapeutic takeover of the public school system, the statement by Vandebos, Cummings, and Deleon would suggest that the testifiers' impression of the ubiquity of psychotherapeutic discourse is not unfounded. Thus the very success of its proliferation makes it available for public scrutiny and commentary.

While there is a willingness to view psychotherapy as belonging to a particular professional realm, the testimony also evinces a general distrust of the psychological enterprise and education that might be influenced by it. As Ann Pfizenmaier put it in her statement at the Hearings, "We cannot keep our nation good if we sacrifice our young people to satisfy the curiosity of the scientists and psychologists under the guise of education" (310). And Marilyn Lewis asks, "Is this type of so-called education anything short of experimental psychological maneuvering on the part of the educational system? Is this anything less than a rudely offensive invasion of privacy upon unsuspecting children and their parents?" (345). But this fear and suspicion are also ironically accompanied by a certain contempt for the lack of rigor or substantiveness of educational projects steeped in the so-called therapy techniques. We see this in Schlafly's introduction in her reference to "mind-games" cited earlier. "Games" suggests deception but also a lack of seriousness. This implication is made explicit in the testimony, for example, of Alan C. Thomaier, who charges that the "humanist change agents" (303) are undermining education and invading

privacy through the therapy of "sensitivity training" and "role-playing." He emphasizes that "Our children need learning, not the fun and games of permissive classrooms" (302)[emphasis added]. The suggestion here is that despite the acceptance of the legitimacy of psychotherapy, there exists concomitantly a backlash to it. And this backlash is couched in the paradox of "therapy" being both too powerful to be allowed to operate without restraint and yet too "soft" to be the basis of any real knowledge or the core of any serious inquiry.

Within much of the testimony, this so-deemed "therapy" and "psychological" education that dwell on personal lives are feminized through a rhetoric of patriotism and machismo. This strategy is brought to the fore in testimony such as that given by Ron Figuly. Figuly claims the purpose of his appearance at the hearings is "to give evidence of the bias of a few but apparently very influential psychologists in education who are promoting curricula which are oriented towards pacifism and unilateral disarmament" (310). Figuly and others lament that there is a lack of patriotism and respect for family being instilled in students because of the focus on Sidney Simon's Values Clarification that undermines absolutism. Figuly's militarism connects "psychology" with pacifism in his longing for a tougher, more virile, it seems, back-to-basics curriculum. Likewise Anne Pfizenmaier despairs over "students' lack of discipline and basic skills" (308) fomented through the therapy techniques of progressive education. This dichotomy of a "soft" psychologically-based knowledge versus a "hard" skills-based knowledge points to another theme that emerges from the testimony with regard to

privacy invasion: the relationship of privacy to objectivity.

What I see emerging in the testimony is a linkage between the desire for privacy and a belief in the existence of objective knowledge--that is to say that proponents of privacy assert that there is an objective ("basic knowledge") that falls outside any system of values and therefore can be taught without interfering with anyone's belief systems or invading what is deemed private or personal. This is the distinction Schlafly makes between "cognitive" and "affective." What such basic knowledge is remains curiously unspecified, except to be designated, as, for example, in the testimony of Shirley Whitlock, matters of "style or correctness of vocabulary, spelling, grammar, punctuation, paragraphing, facts, etc." (224-28). "Skills" becomes a code word for objective knowledge, and the invalid knowledge of therapy and moral reasoning is equated with privacy invasion. Testifiers are consistently clear about what they think is inappropriate influence in the public schools, citing Lawrence Kohlberg's theories and Sidney Simon's Values Clarification program with an occasional railing against John Dewey. They refer to actual classroom assignments and discussions, including journal writing, as attempts to gain information about students at the expense of teaching them real knowledge. But little mention is made of how the preferable "skills" themselves should actually be taught, merely that they should be. The call for a return to basics in much of the testimony ignores the context of the desired skills transmission and therefore effectively side-steps the issue of what would constitute a value-free pedagogy. This permits the idea of an essential right to privacy to remain

unexamined in its implications.

We see an example of this in the testimony of Kay Fradeneck, in which she describes English textbook exercises that teach paragraph development. The sample paragraphs in the book are disparaging of organized religion and also (I imagine as an attempt to engage a teenage audience) make reference to things such as "eggheads vs. partiers," Playboy Magazine, and the idea that teenagers are casual about sex (162). Fradeneck found such material offensive, but despite her charge that it is emblematic of the progressivism that cripples the efficacy of public schools, her description of the book's formalistic exercises and explanations of how to organize paragraphs and develop arguments sounds surprisingly what Berlin termed "current-traditionalist" in their bent. "Skills" are indeed being taught, it would seem, but not through subject matter that is consonant with Fradeneck's belief system. Accordingly, Fradeneck lumps this book into the category of psychological education that is at odds with the unspecified basic skills approach. By implication the utopian basic skills approach would not conflict with her value system and leave children's right to privacy intact. It would not be "psychological" in nature--that is, it would not touch upon the personal lives of students or parents.

Of course the contradictions become immediately apparent. Clearly a "regime of truth," as Foucault would put it, is functioning here to normalize and render invisible certain values. Teaching patriotism, for example, as many of the testifiers advocate, is not value-free education, nor is it any less "impersonal" than teaching pacifism. In fact the testimonies are filled with such contradictions, but my goal

is not to shoot fish in a barrel. I do not wish to ridicule the testifiers, in part because it is mean-spirited to do so. Some of the testimony is poignant, such as that of Flora Retig (138-42) who blames the school for her son's suicide. She complains that the school invaded her son's privacy by allowing him to write English papers about his marijuana use, but also complains that the teacher did not further violate the son's privacy by notifying her as a parent about what he was writing. The implication is that if he she had known about his drug use, she might have been able to intervene in his suicide, yet she also states that she had been aware of his drug use from an early age before the high school papers were ever written. The testimony of Flora Retig reads as a woman trying to cope with a heart-rending loss. But what is important for my purposes here is not the logical fallacies of the testifier's assertions but rather the circumstances under which charges of privacy violation occur. When a pedagogy appears to promote values that the testifier's share, such as patriotism or belief in God, concerns about privacy abate. When a pedagogy seems to be in conflict with those values, it is viewed as part of the therapy education that invades privacy.

Another reason to resist outright dismissal of the testimony recorded in Schlafly's book is this: the charges made by the testifiers are not without merit. They have correctly identified that the values of public education policies are at odds with their own and in so doing point us to a larger philosophical and political question with regard to the nature of "public" education: who is it for and who sets its agenda? This is somewhat less of an issue perhaps

for colleges and universities, but nonetheless the objections raised in the hearings may serve as a barometer for how students and teachers will gauge what is private and why; and what subjects and discourses are understood as "therapeutic" or "psychological" and their place within learning. As we know, the call for a back to basics and "hard" knowledge is not limited to the public school system, and it behooves us to pay attention to cultural perceptions on these counts. But yet a further reason to give credence to what in some ways seem rantings of the right-wing is that the objections raised in the hearings about the psychologizing of the curriculum are not unfounded. The objections provide insights useful in grappling with questions of privacy, questions that continue to be issues in writing instruction. Drug education, to use an example cited frequently in the testimony, is indeed very "psychological" in its stress on individual choices and peer pressure, etc, which leads critics to the conclusion that the schools, on the authority of the government, are extending their reach into the private lives of citizens. Rather than dismiss the objections out of hand, might we not ask why a drug prevention program focuses on the personal choices and lifestyles of individuals instead of on political and social contexts? In other words, what if drug prevention in schools emphasized the destruction that first-world drug consumption has on third world cultures and economies? From this perspective, drug purchasing becomes a question of responsible consumerism and a somewhat different moral choice. There are some obvious answers as to why such a course of study is not pursued, and I don't imagine my approach would thrill privacy protesters any more than the

existing drug prevention programs, as it would no doubt lead to a questioning of patriotism. But my point is that in this case, psychologizing the curriculum amounts to de-politicizing it. Despite protesters' fears, the liberal agenda with which they take issue serves to deflect criticism and contain radical critique of the status quo through the interiorized subjectivity of psychological discourse. Drug abuse, in this scenario, is an individual problem rather than a social or political one.

I am not the first progressive reader to grant validity to issues raised through the testimonies of the Hatch Amendment Hearings. But liberal educators, such as Edward Jenkinson, for example, make their concessions through a liberal perspective of privacy and rights that is in many ways consistent with the conservative view of the protesters. In his analysis of the hearings, Jenkinson notes that alleged invasions of privacy occurred most frequently in sex and drug education classes, counseling sessions and English classes. Jenkinson, referencing Schlafly, lists some of the examples that parents gave as invasions of privacy:

--Are you going to practice religion just like your parents?

--Who has the last word in your family?

--What is your parents' income?

--Do you believe in a God who answers prayers?

--How important is making out with a girl? Smoking pot?

--Complete at least a 5-day daily dietary intake chart, and keep a health and feelings journal.

--Discuss misuse of substances by parents, for

example, alcohol, valium, etc.

What is of interest to me is the unholy trinity of "sex and drug education classes, counseling sessions and English classes." Why, of all curricular subjects, does English become singled out as a transgressor of privacy and linked to the therapeutic "counseling" and "drug/sex education"? What is it about the study of English that puts it in this camp? The answer, no doubt, is connected to the individualist and psychological bent of Western literature but also to the question of writing, an activity most closely associated with Language Arts and English. When we consider that theories as well as popular understandings of writing have been predicated on notions of the self and interiority, it makes sense that English classes find their way into the therapy debate. Indeed, Jenkinson tells us that writing assignments in general and journal-keeping in particular were causes for concern among the distraught citizenry.

Jenkinson's response to charges of privacy invasion is illuminating. He maintains that such charges cannot be lightly dismissed but points to the conundrum that writing teachers face with regard to this issue: "Teachers of writing . . . know that powerful writing frequently explodes from a writer's narration of personal experience" and "that writing can serve as an excellent tool for self-examination and for the discovery of solutions to personal problems. Writing can be used as therapy, as a cry for help, as a means of discovering how to bring order to a chaotic life." But, Jenkinson cautions us, "if students are asked to reveal secrets which might cause harm or embarrassment to themselves or their families, then such revelations could be considered

invasions of privacy." Any such disclosures should only occur voluntarily. Despite Jenkinson's caveat, it seems difficult to reconcile a view of "writing as therapy" with one that wouldn't rely on "secrets" being revealed. And what exactly is the "power" of the personal narrative in question? That vagary leaves room for discussion, but I suspect that part of the "power" that Jenkinson is alluding to is the naming and publicizing of what is often "secret" knowledge. Jenkinson seems to be suggesting that notions of reasonableness and responsibility can guide us through these thorny issues. But the question that begins to arise for me is this: can Jenkinson, or the rest of us, really have it both ways?

This difficulty is further underscored in his discussion of textbook censorship, where he cites examples of questionable so-called "invasion of privacy" assignments with which Norma and Mel Gabler, right-wing textbook censors, take issue. The Gablers identify assignments they deem to be treading on privacy. Jenkinson lists two such purportedly "objectionable" items:

1. Segregation because of race has been ruled illegal by the United States Supreme Court. What other kinds of segregation can you think of? Should all kinds of segregation be prevented?
2. The boy in the story said he was happy because he liked himself. What are some things you know how to do that make you like yourself? If you were feeling lonely or unhappy or disappointed, what are some ways you might help yourself feel better?

Jenkinson implies that such questions are not invasions of

privacy and that such questions would not be so classified by "teachers of English who have strong pedagogical reasons for asking students to respond in writing." Here are some examples of what Jenkinson feels might be genuine invasions:

--Describe a fight between your father and your mother.

--Write about a time you cheated and were caught.

--Write about a time you embarrassed your parents.

--Write a factual account of an incident during which you broke a law or a school rule.

While the distinctions being drawn no doubt stem from a noble enough impulse of acting responsibly with regard to student rights, it is not at all clear to me what the differences are between the legitimate and illegitimate examples, except beyond a kind of surface crassness in the prose of the latter. Jenkinson rests his case on an uninterrogated notion of propriety and liberal understanding of privacy. Let me use the example of the segregation question to explain what I mean. This assignment seems to be the most "legitimate" on its face and yet it is the one that, I would argue, might very well be the most threatening on a personal level. Certainly there is enormous potential here for students to embarrass themselves and their families by revealing their views on segregation, if the students were to take the "you" of the assignment seriously, that is, as referring to themselves, and not read it as a rhetorical device. But, from a culturally liberal framework, we have come to define segregation as a "social" issue, and it is this definition that Jenkinson is relying on in making his distinction. I put "social" in quotations marks, not because

I don't think segregation is a social issue--of course it is--but I am emphasizing that through common agreement we mark it off as an area of public knowledge that can be discussed and debated. It is a "social," that is "public," rather than a "personal" issue. (And, excluding John Rocker, one probably does not go to one's analyst to discuss segregation.)

But defining segregation as a public issue has not always been the case. In fact, historically in America the racism connected with slavery and segregation has in part been sustained through the rationale of privacy rights. The lunch counter was once understood as the domain of private citizens, not a public site of government regulation. Abolitionist arguments were often countered with the assertion that the ownership of slaves was a "private" concern. And Jon-Christian Suggs tells us, in his historical analysis of African-American narrative and the law, that the ideological basis for slavery derives from a romantic, individualized notion of privacy in contradistinction to community: "Privileging the individual right to privacy with its extracommunitarian implications constructs a rationale for the status of slaves" where "they are unable to exhibit the characteristics of a romantic personality" (56) and can thus be deprived of autonomy. Furthermore, much like domestic violence, slavery and segregation have been protected from moral and legal scrutiny through the veil of the personal. While public opinion may have shifted for the most part with regard to racism to move it from a private matter to a public concern, we see the same phenomenon operating in other arenas. Harriet Malinowitz, for example,

has noted the failure of the liberal rhetoric of privacy and rights to dislodge homophobia from American culture ("Rhetoric"). I see this at work tangibly in classroom discussions where students, who will define racism as a public question, seek to protect their homophobia by declaring it a "private" matter of attitude that should be exempt from public scrutiny. Although the segregation question that Jenkinson cites moves in a larger world than the student's immediate reference, the Neanderthalic objections of the right-wing Gablers remind us of the personal dimension of privacy within this public sphere.

Jenkinson points out that the Gablers object to any "call for students' opinions or declarations of values . . . to expressions of feelings, of thoughts, of beliefs." It's hard to imagine of course what knowledge would look like absent these things, and I apply here my earlier conclusion about the relationship between privacy and values: I suspect that, just as evidenced in the Hatch Amendment Hearings, the Gablers do not really mean any feelings or beliefs, but rather certain politically charged cases of opinion that need to be protected in the shroud of "privacy," such as views on segregation. To take the Gabler criteria at face value would be to eliminate virtually all writing and learning in the humanities and social sciences. This is a facile point of course. I expect few people could or would want to abide by the Gablers' suggestions. But this shows the need to look more closely at the objections of the Gablers, the Schlaflys, and the Hayakawas to determine what criteria, beyond the stated, they are using as gauges of privacy. Doing so will help to map out the cultural parameters in operation. When

are opinions and beliefs public and when are they private or personal, and who or what is protected by the assignments?

For Jenkinson's alternative and ostensibly more reasonable criteria for determining privacy violation is, in the end, not much more elucidating than the Gablers. "Questions that call for expressions of non-secret, non-threatening feelings, thoughts, or beliefs generally would not be so classified" as invasions of privacy. Jenkinson provides a further list of questions for educators to ask themselves to help determine whether they are being abusive, such as what educational objectives are being served and why does the teacher want to know this information. But assuming that an instructor's assignments are not merely thoughtless and that calls for student opinions and revelations not merely gratuitous, the larger question of determining the boundaries of public and private in the classroom and in writing assignments is insufficiently interrogated in Jenkinson's analysis. If "secret" and "threatening" are used to judge "private," we will eliminate almost as many possibilities as under the Gabler guidelines, and certainly views about segregation and racism could be construed as "secret," a reality that the Gablers are obviously tuned into when they condemn such inquiry as a violation of privacy.

I might add here that my point at this juncture is not so much to solve the puzzle of appropriate versus inappropriate assignments but to consider, through a reading of their criteria, what unstated premises might be determining the boundaries in analyses such as Jenkinson's or the Gablers'. For though Jenkinson condemns questions such as "what is your parents' income?" and "discuss parental

substance abuse," it does not take too much of a stretch to imagine how such questions might be relevant to a particular curriculum, one of the other criteria Jenkinson offers to guide teachers. Indeed one of the implicit objections in the testimony at the Hatch Amendment hearings was that whole categories of inquiry were seen as invasion of privacy. How could, for example, one conduct a counseling session on substance abuse without inquiring about family or parental history in this regard? Such a situation would pass the Jenkinson test of being connected to curriculum, but it begs the question of the place of counseling within a public institution. This is contested ground directly tied to the greater shifting terrain: what is considered public and what is considered private and what is at stake in the distinction? The question has direct bearing on the limits of writing instruction in colleges and universities, because although, as I stated earlier, we are often not dealing with the legal question of students' status as minors, our understanding of privacy fuels our sense of appropriateness and thus determines the boundaries of our students' writing and of our classes.

#### The Debate in College

To further explore the structures of personal and public and our reactions to them specifically in the college writing classroom, I will look closely at a controversy that erupted in the pages of College English with regard to these said boundaries. In my experience, the exchange that occurs reflects the conversations writing teachers often have when they broach this subject of the "personal" with each other. The controversy in question was generated by an article,

"Crossing Lines," a piece that deals with the public and private question specifically within the context of the freshman writing class. The themes that emerge in this debate are similar to those that show up in the Hatch Amendment Hearings: the question of professionalization in relation to the practice of the "psychological" or "therapeutic," a distrust of the ubiquity and project of psychological discourse, and a belief in objective or "safe" knowledge that does not intrude on privacy. At this juncture, I would like to look carefully at the published responses to Carole Deletiner, the author of the piece in question, as well as her rebuttal, because I think those responses are instructive with regard to our cultural understandings of public and private as played out in the freshman writing class. Both Cheryl Alton's and Kathleen Pfeiffer's responses find fault with Deletiner's pedagogy, Alton more sympathetically and Pfeiffer far more vituperatively. But both writers reveal an anxious relationship to the authority of therapeutic discourse over human experience and, ultimately, so does Deletiner herself.

Deletiner describes the way she and her students write to each other using their personal stories as the bases of their texts. Deletiner describes a classroom where she and her students quite literally share their emotional pain. What's more, her pedagogy seems steeped in the principle of "you show me yours and I'll show you mine." Her motivation for moving her class in this direction is presented as stemming from her own experience within the academy: as a marginalized graduate student who is frequently alienated and indeed humiliated by her Ph.D. program and professors. She

presents her own teaching style in contrast with the frostiness of the academy at its worst--where there is no room for students to express vulnerability or insecurities or even a relationship between text and life. Such expressions are inappropriately personal responses in the graduate courses that Deletiner has suffered through. Anxious not to duplicate this hierarchy in her own practice, Deletiner opens up her classroom and herself for the expression of pain and to feature the therapeutic tendency of writing and community. In the writing of Deletiner's students "the feelings and pain drip off the edges of their pages" (813). And what's more, so do Deletiner's feelings and pain, as she writes and speaks to her class about her own human suffering. As she comments to a student, "What purpose does pain serve? It joins us" (817).

As I read the article, Deletiner's title, "Crossing Lines," refers to at least two transgressions: crossing the sacrosanct boundary from writing instructor to "therapist" in her role as responder to student texts, and crossing the divide from what is appropriately public to what is inappropriately personal as the public authority figure in the classroom. I draw attention to this latter transgression especially, because in some ways it contradicts the Western role of the therapist who refrains from revealing anything of himself to his clients about his own life. In this way, Deletiner's "crossing" is a transgression of a transgression, violating first the rule that says writing teachers will not be therapists and second, that therapists, or confessors, will make their own lives irrelevant to the interaction. But there is a public price for Deletiner's performance of the

personal, if not in her classroom, then in institutional and collegial responses, as indicated by the comments of Cheryl Alton and Kathleen Pfeiffer in a subsequent issue of College English.

The first, more sympathetic, set of comments by Cheryl Alton can be summed up in the following way: while Alton understands Deletiner's impulse for wanting to "cross lines"--Alton herself says she shares that impulse--she finds it ill-advised because she is "not sure that we English instructors are qualified to cross the lines where perhaps *only trained psychologists should tread*" (666-67)[emphasis added]. We should not "play the part of a pseudo psychiatrist" (666). She then buttresses her intuition with a story about a recalcitrant student whom she had to threaten with failure for refusing to write in his assigned class journal. The student finally wrote that he had once killed someone and had served time in prison. Alton responded sympathetically, encouraging the student to forgive himself and move on. After this the student completed all his assignments, passed his exit exam and the course. Alton then goes on to tell how, feeling proud of herself for getting the student through his writing block, she told "a psychologist friend over lunch one day" (668) about her achievement. The psychologist friend was apparently dismayed and felt Alton had been irresponsible. I quote at length here Alton's paraphrase of the psychologist friend:

. . . my friend became quite perturbed at my naïveté. She wondered if I really understood what I might be doing by allowing this student and others to write even (sic) their most personal

feelings in their essays. What if this man was a true psychopath? Was I prepared to deal with that? Could I tell by looking at him? What if he had developed a hatred for me (or for the other three teachers who had failed him before) and his journal entry had been a warning? Did I ever consider that? If he made such a detailed confession about the crime in writing, would he later feel paranoid that he had added some incriminating information, or might he become angry and fear I would share his paper with the police? What might he do to himself or to me if he later regretted what he had put into writing? As she spoke, I felt foolish because I had never considered any of these things.

What strikes me about this tale is that there is a generic quality to the account, a precedent set earlier in Alton's commentary when she tells of an upset student who was outraged that an essay she wrote about a dead baby only got a C. If there were a Thompson Motif Index for composition lore the way there is for folklore, the tale type for this story might be designated as "student writes about life trauma/ student receives mediocre grade/ student expresses vexation that the represented life should be valued more highly." I have heard versions of this story on several occasions. As is the nature of folktales, there are regional and historical variations on the basic theme.

With regard to Alton's description of lunch with her friend, the shape of that narrative might be described in the following way: the well-intended but innocent lay person takes an action that she naively considers appropriate but

then has the error of her ways pointed out to her by one in possession of professional knowledge who obviously knows better. Moreover the element of danger that allows this story to stand as a warning places it in the company of the best fairy tales, despite that the specifics of the account are most definitely in the realm of the contemporary. This is a cautionary tale, where near disaster was brought on by the hubris of a generalist who tried to apply common sense thinking to what clearly called for specialization. It is the sort of folktale that maintains disciplinary hegemony over human interaction.

By invoking the terms folklore and fairytale, I don't mean to become embroiled in a debate about the story's veracity. Rather, I am attempting to identify the cultural paradigm that shapes the morality of Alton's personal account. While I am less interested in questioning whether "it really happened," (which, ironically, is the position that teachers in receipt of personal narratives often find/place themselves), I confess that for me the term "true psychopath" sets off warning signals. If the student were a true psychopath, Alton, by cultural definition of what that term seems to imply, would be in danger regardless of what she said or did, because no one, after all, would be safe from such a nefarious individual. Moreover, it is hard to imagine the "psychologist friend" speaking from her professional authority using such unprofessional terms, but perhaps that is only a reflection of Alton's paraphrasing as a layperson. Indeed the statement seems to reflect an archetypal construction of lurking evil instantiated in apparently normal-seeming students.

Although Alton's conversion from generalist to respecter of disciplinary boundaries is successful as a result of her talking to by the psychologist friend ("my sense of pride and achievement . . . turned to skepticism on that day"[668]), we are not offered an alternative scenario for what she should have done to avert the near disaster when the student burdened her with the knowledge that he had killed someone. Should Alton have called the police? Notified the dean? Referred the student to counseling? Refused to respond to the student at all? I would think that the real danger seems to be that Alton had a killer in her class at all rather than the fact that he should write or tell about his actions. The psychologist friend's censure seems to suggest that Alton would be better off not knowing about her students, that lack of knowledge would somehow protect her, a sort of ignorance is bliss strategy. In any event, it appears that the intuitive action Alton took (if we are to credit it with having any effect at all, which it may not have) was not amiss but rather on target, allowing the student, who had taken the class three times before, finally to write and to pass the course, all without any kind of "psychopathic" relapse along the lines the psychologist friend feared. Far from misplaced, Alton's sense of pride seems justified. She was able to navigate successfully what the professional herself had deemed an explosive situation. Perhaps the psychologist friend might stand to learn something from Alton's tactics. And I find myself wondering if she wasn't just the slightest bit jealous of the writing teacher.

For Alton's anecdote can be read as a turf battle between the two disciplines--with psychology winning out.

Alton, in the end, is incapable of conceiving of her interaction with the student outside the discourse of psychology. Why does Alton see the role she played here in terms of "psychiatrist," pseudo or otherwise, unquestioningly ceding jurisdiction for this student's narrative to the therapist's purview? Is the clinical model the only one available to us in this case? Alton's deferential response is consistent with an image of the discipline as an assemblage of writing teachers who are seen to have no discipline, who are "handmaids" (Schell 87) of the academy, and who therefore ought easily to relinquish authority to others who "know better," within and outside their institutions, about the goals, methods, and evaluation of writing instruction. In this picture, writing instructors seem to be suffering from a kind of collective inferiority complex, evidenced in their acceptance of external evaluation measures and the status of their classes as service courses. From this perspective, psychology becomes one more authoritative discourse in front of which writing teachers must cower.

Indeed in some ways Alton's story seems an odd one to tell in support of her thesis about writing teachers not playing "pseudo psychiatrists." It is after all a success story, not particularly convincing as a warning about what happens when writing instructors venture into territory culturally marked for the confidentiality of therapists and priests, although the legal and ethical question of confidentiality inadvertently raised in the narrative is a good one: to what extent would the information given writing teachers by their students be considered protected? Would we

be ethically or legally obligated, for example, to reveal or conceal it from police or even school administrators? It would make an interesting subject for a TV law drama, the issue being whether there is a legal privilege in the student-teacher relationship, etc. And would the privilege apply/not apply to what are considered culturally public subjects, such as, say, political views in a McCarthyesque era? Imagine a Homeland Security team asking to see student papers arguing in defense of *Jihad*. I bring up this (not so?) hypothetical example as a poignant reminder that we cannot take for granted definitions of privacy and appropriateness; that these definitions are tied to the political landscape in culturally specific ways.

Indeed a response to this issue of privilege, published in College English at a later date by Lorraine E. Granieri, offers a legal label of the student-teacher relationship as "fiduciary," which, according to Granieri, does not qualify as "privileged," as we might well imagine. Of course the issue of confidentiality cuts both ways: the question is not just whether student confidences can legally be divulged. We might also wonder about the good Samaritan aspect of this question; if a student writes about suicide, for example, prior to committing it, can the teacher be held legally accountable for not intervening? Likewise I find myself wondering if a *therapist* can similarly be held civilly or criminally accountable for not being able to prevent the suicide. I ask this question because the fiduciary model which Granieri describes sounds as though it would cover not just the teacher/student relationship but the client/therapist relationship also:

A teacher's responsibility . . . is to augment the decision making capacities of his or her students in ways that will enhance their functioning in society. . . . The fiduciary model recognizes the superior knowledge that professionals have, imposes special obligations on them by virtue of that superior knowledge, yet permits clients to make decisions that they judge are important in their lives. (492)

Such criteria seem applicable to the therapist/client relationship as well.

Certainly the legal questions are an important part of our mindset in a litigious society where people are conditioned to be alert for the potential law suit in any given situation. But I'm struck, nonetheless, by the air of hyper-vigilance that pervades the various caveats of Alton's psychologist friend. If only we could be so circumspect about all our assignments and responses to student writing, or indeed about all our human interactions in general, as the friend wants us to be. I suppose at any given time we might have a "true psychopath" in the classroom, and one of our writing assignments might affect that person in unpredictable ways. What if, for example, I gave students an article to read about the dangers of pharmaceuticals or the incompetence of the medical profession, and this caused the psychopath to stop taking prescribed medication? Had I ever stopped to think about that, I imagine my imaginary psychologist friend demanding of me at our imaginary lunch together. We might also ask about sins of omission--suppose not providing a student the chance to write in a journal induced a

psychopathic episode, or, to be less melodramatic, caused the student to drop the class? If we are worried about outcomes, shouldn't this--action that we fail to take--be of equal concern to us? I would say that in at least some instances the "outcome" issue is a dodge. Instead, it is our ideas about privacy and propriety that are informing our understanding of what constitutes a "therapeutic" situation. Because we would prefer not to have the responsibility of certain kinds of knowledge, we willingly professionalize the personal and ascribe it to the realm of the psychological.

This is not to make light of the responsibility that teachers, as human beings, have towards their students, as other human beings. It is a truism to say that our writing assignments may have unforeseen or unpredictable effects on students; that they may be painful for them in ways we can't know or understand. "I feel that sometimes we do not really know who our students are" (668), Alton states wisely, however superfluously, as she casts them in the part of the great unknown from which we may need protection. No, we do not know our students or anyone else for that matter, or at least we know only in part. Certainly in any human interaction there is a degree of risk, but the warnings of the psychologist friend, which were meant to extend to the general practice of allowing students to write about what they consider personal, remind me of the practice of placing bands of tissue paper across public toilet seats as guarantors of sanitized bowls. The desire for, or capitulation to, this sanitizing, this clinicalizing of human experience, reveals itself in the partition of personal from public knowledge via therapeutic discourse. For Alton's

response to her student: "Now forgive yourself and move on!"(668) smacks of a hybrid of religious benediction and I'm OK/ you're OK rhetoric. The psychologist friend may be right that Alton, lacking any more viable paradigm, trespassed into clinical territory where the realm of personal experience has been so thoroughly colonized by therapeutic discourse as to displace any other way of conceiving of the relationship between teacher and student. According to Alton we "play the part of the pseudo psychiatrist, even though we all claim that is not what we are doing" (666).

This statement may be true on both counts, which raises some questions. For example, can we borrow responsibly and productively from the psychological field in our discussion of personal writing? Wendy Bishop (along with, as I discuss in Chapter Three, some academic proponents of writing and healing) has advocated this position, stating that "we need to understand the degree to which writing may be a therapeutic process and the degree to which teachers and administrators can or should undertake counseling roles" ("Therapy"). She calls for a rethinking of the "sway of craft-based pedagogy" to which teachers are enthralled, a pedagogy that allows them to avoid responsibility for the inevitable therapeutic aspect of writing instruction. Bishop audaciously counters prevailing wisdom by suggesting that "Perhaps it is time to enlarge WPA training by providing new teachers and administrators with an introduction to psychoanalytic theory and the basics of counseling to support them in their necessary work." I question Bishop's elision of what can be two very different agendas: psychoanalytic theory and counseling. It highlights for me the assumptions

often made in these discussions about what kind of "training" counselors and therapists actually get that should so endow them with authority over interpreting and responding to human experience. Not all, perhaps few even, counselors or therapists are versed in psychoanalytic theory. Indeed legal requirements for functioning as a "counselor" vary from state to state--not all require licensing or specific formal training.

But nonetheless Bishop goes in a direction that few have dared go before--rather than repudiating the role of therapist she asks how we can be better at it. Bishop's minority opinion here is in part a consequence of the polarized discourse that aligns the personal with the therapeutic: in this zero sum game either we are "for" or "against" writing teachers being therapists. But is this the only possible direction to take? Are there other options? Is there another model available to us by which to process matters deemed personal, or does such knowledge by default become the province of the psychological and therefore off limits to those not "trained" in the field? In her explanation of why compositionists have shunned the emotional aspects of writing, Deborah Brandt asserts that "Because emotions are believed to need 'correcting' through therapy and because therapy is the nomenclature for a treatment model, emotions are considered a disease that needs curing" ("Therapy") and are therefore off-limits to college writing instruction.

But subjects considered emotional or personal perhaps need not be linked automatically with the psychologically therapeutic. Religious advisors, such as ministers and

priests, for example, frequently engage in what would be termed psychological counseling, and while many might even be credentialed therapists or have some formal training in counseling, their cultural authority to intervene does not stem from the same source as the medicalized "therapist." I am not suggesting that religion is a better extradisciplinary paradigm for writing instruction than psychology but merely that its existence in relation to the personal means that the psychotherapeutic model is perhaps not inevitable. Is it possible that rhetoric is the means through which writing teachers can stake out their own cultural claim in this territory? Contemporary revaluations of Aristotle, for example, suggest that the rhetorician has always had a hand in the emotional element of human discourse that nowadays seems to belong to the psychologists (Quandahl). Studies in the personal essay and the writing to heal movement, which I will return to in Chapters Three and Four, are also models worth investigating in this regard. These provide other possible directions to follow in response to the "craft-based" avoidance strategy that Bishop identifies as hovering over the field of composition.

Indeed evoking "craft" or its synonym "skill," as the testimony of the Hatch Hearings demonstrated, is often a key rhetorical strategy of the deriders of personal writing as they advance the claim that such writing does not help students become better writers. While this line of reasoning generally embroils us in the "academic discourse"<sup>2</sup> debate, it is at the same time only steps away from the therapy dilemma, with the idea being that instead of receiving writing "skills" students are coddled with counseling. We see this

rationale in full operation in the second published response to Deletiner, a letter by Kathleen Pfeiffer, in which the writer reveals her hostility towards what she perceives as an indulgent instructor. Pfeiffer's thrust differs from Alton's, where Alton is somewhat unusual in the stress her remarks lay on the teacher being at risk when we invite the great unwashed to share stories of their lives through their writing. Alton's student was a perpetrator of a crime, which presents a different instance from the situations outlined in Deletiner's original article. The personal writing of Deletiner and her students, it seems, focused mostly on them as recipients of misfortune, which prompted Kathleen Pfeiffer to charge Deletiner with following "the cult of the victim" (671). There is much that is predictable in Pfeiffer's comments, including her rhetorical question: "Are we teachers or are we therapists?" (669), which she indeed answers on the next page, with a declarative restatement: "We are teachers, not therapists" (670). Clearly for Pfeiffer there is a definitive, discernible line between the two roles, although she appears to assume rather than articulate that they are different and inimical.

But the outrage of Pfeiffer's response seems steeped not in the fear of getting into waters over her head, as it is for Alton, but in a deep-seated mistrust of the legitimacy of psychological intervention. Specifically, Pfeiffer's prose reveals a disparagement of psychology as a feminized discourse of the personal that is beneath the consideration of the serious, above all practical, business of freshman composition. For, according to Pfeiffer, in the first-year writing class "our objective is to equip students with the

tools to help them communicate effectively in the academy, with sensitivity towards their audience, with clarity that will be understood and respected by teachers and others who will read their papers in the future" (669). The reductiveness with which Pfeiffer is able to encapsulate neatly the *raison d'être* for composition in the university is remarkable. In one fell swoop, she eliminates any contention about the philosophical underpinnings of the enterprise and relegates it to a service course designed to facilitate an academic discourse that itself is, in her version, surprisingly free of conflict about its own legitimacy. The construction of her sentence suggests that to "communicate effectively" is a self-contained concept with a diamantine simplicity not to be sullied by complication. She slips somewhat from her austere stance when she introduces the idea that communication should occur with sensitivity towards the audience. Indeed that phrase is jarring, coming as it does after brisk words like "equip" and "tool" and "effectively," all the sorts of action words that pepper resumes. But she undercuts any perceived softness a word like "sensitivity" might connote with the affirmation that this same communication should occur with "clarity that will be understood and respected by teachers." The phrase "clarity that will be understood" is itself confusingly redundant and an undermining of that simplicity of effective communication she asserts is the governing principle of the writing class. I don't know if Pfeiffer would have elaborated on these goals if she had more space or indeed if she made longer remarks that were edited. But, regardless, the definition that is allowed to stand exploits the same rhetoric of skills relied

on in the Hatch Amendment Hearings, where "skills" evokes a discourse of rigor, vigor and utilitarian objectivity.

That the overall tone of Pfeiffer's response is one of impatience with Deletiner's "soft" approach is revealed in various places, most notably when she paradoxically begins to present something of a personal narrative even as she decries the same. She claims, as Deletiner does, to have been humiliated and alienated in her Ph.D. program and even to have had "a mean and unfair grammar school teacher" (669) like many people. The implication of the sarcasm is that Pfeiffer finds these facts inconsequential to the effective communicating that is the proper business of the writing class. She goes on to say: "No, I won't tell you whether I'm in therapy, or come from a dysfunctional family because that is beside the point: in fact, that it is beside the point is precisely my point" (669)[original emphasis]. Pfeiffer makes an interesting move here, connecting the issue of privacy (that my personal life is nobody's business) with a stoicism that is contemptuous of Deletiner's focus on personal pain. "It" (her hypothetical dysfunctionality) is "beside the point" not only because such matters are nobody's business but because such matters are to be borne properly in silence without complaint. It is not just the maintenance of privacy that is "precisely" the point but an impatience with terms like "dysfunctional family." In Pfeiffer's criticism, such terms work metonymically to reveal her distaste for the personal bent of the psychologized, feminized writing class.

This is demonstrated flagrantly in her concluding paragraph when she once again invokes the specter of "effective communication" (671) as the mantra for writing

pedagogy and remonstrates against "the weepy world of confessions and revelations" and the "self-absorption" of "such teeth-gnashing and soul-baring" that "might help a student recover his or her lost inner child" at the expense of "developing a sophisticated communicative ability" (671). Although Pfeiffer drops hints at various points that echo the warnings about writing teachers not being trained as therapists, it is clear by the end of her commentary that the axe she has to grind is with the discourse of therapy itself and the moral universe it implies. It is possible then to read her objections as being less about personal revelations and more about the rhetoric of those revelations. Interestingly enough, she "confesses" to certain biographical facts such as her status as an adjunct outsider and the humiliation and misunderstanding she has experienced at the hands of nasty faculty. Why should this information be "on point" while whether she is in therapy or from a dysfunctional family be, to use her words, "beside the point"? She appears to be invoking some principle of private versus public knowledge, and I would maintain that principle is linked to the concept of psychological therapy itself rather than notions of personal per se. Thus I am suggesting a recuperation of what first appears as an inexplicably vitriolic diatribe by Pfeiffer against Deletiner as instead a revolt against the psychologizing of the personal. When one of Deletiner's students writes that the course was "very self analytical, motivational, and insightful for me. . . . I felt that I was on the couch at the therapist's office" (Deletiner 817), I imagine Pfeiffer bristling and I find myself wondering how "self analytical, motivational, and

insightful" add up necessarily to being on the therapist's couch. The image itself is a cliché demonstrative of the extent of therapy's incursion into lay experience.

Without saying precisely so, Pfeiffer throughout her objections decries the solipsism that she sees at the core of therapeutic writing and for which she finds the teaching of "effective communication" to be the antidote. Her response to Deletiner's use of Harriet Jacobs's narrative is curiously contradictory and worth noting. Pfeiffer finds it "ironic" that Deletiner chooses Jacobs because "Jacobs's narrative is an ideal piece with which to discuss the necessity of designing one's voice to meet the audience's demands; it allows us to teach the importance of readerly-based prose and of the necessary compromises a writer must make in order to communicate effectively" (670). I agree with this observation; it is well-put. But I am astonished at what Pfeiffer fails to acknowledge: that at the core of Jacobs's stylizing and designing is the genre of confession as played out in the sentimental narrative of the seduction novel. As Jean Fagin Yellin states in her critical introduction to Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Jacobs was "both determined and reluctant to address her sexual history" and so "used the style of the seduction novel" (xxi) to accomplish her purposes. While Pfeiffer seems willing enough to encourage students' rhetorical analysis of Brent's slave narrative, she would, I suppose, discourage them from emulating Jacobs's tactics. That Pfeiffer is unable to connect the strategies of the confessional and the personal that Jacobs employs in telling her story with the writing that students do in class points to a major deficiency not

only in her particular response but in the entire exchange that took place in College English. For Deletiner's counter-statements do little to focus on this issue either. She too resorts to the assurances that she is "not an analyst" (672) and that her students write plenty of traditional "academic" essays. While she gestures towards Berlin's social epistemic rhetoric as forming another important part of her pedagogy, the construction and performance of the personal is left largely unexplored.

What Pfeiffer misses in her emphasis on "effective communication" and audience is that, whatever else they might be doing, Deletiner's students have certainly understood Deletiner as audience and are effectively communicating with her. Students have read the teacher and the class well, understanding that a particular type of personal writing is not only allowed but valued. To say this is not to be cynical. Pfeiffer declares that "students are ill-equipped to negotiate responsibly such intimacy as (Deletiner) advocates" (670), but Deletiner's article is, at the very least, a tribute to how well the students do perform that negotiation. Pfeiffer makes the mistake of viewing the student's narratives as unmediated outpourings rather than performances. To do so robs the personal narrative of a rhetorical function it has long fulfilled and which becomes increasingly, not less, important in negotiating a terrain of identity politics and ethical authority. As Judith Summerfield tells us,

The "personal self" presented to us on the interviewer's couch, in the student paper, needs to be read as performance, as an event under

description. To understand such descriptions, such inscribing of personae in public spaces, we need to historicize, to turn to the 'sources of the self,' and the making of identity and to constructs of the natural, the authentic, and the sincere.

(167)

The students of Deletiner's class are constructing personal selves to function in public ways. What Deletiner might have hinted at, but did not, in response to Pfeiffer's criticisms is that the ability to "tell one's story" becomes important, and rhetorically sophisticated, cultural work.

I should say that I too found myself uncomfortable reading the article "Crossing Lines," less because of the ethical questions that Alton and Pfeiffer zero in on and more because of the rhetorical position of femininity that Deletiner occupies in her text--one of extreme vulnerability and deprecation. For it is almost impossible for me to imagine a man writing this article, not merely because of its location in the identifiably personal and the way that strategy is less available to men, but because of the way her position of personal is one of unqualified openness and, to that extent--and here I find myself agreeing with Pfeiffer--a position of weakness. Neither Alton or Pfeiffer, both women, read gender in their come-uppances to Deletiner. But I question to what extent the nurturing and vulnerable role that Deletiner performs in her narratives is part of a feminized and essentialized narrative of the public personal in which women are positioned as emotional conduits. To what extent does the vulnerability of this version of personal writing invalidate it as a feminist or appropriate strategy

for women or others who occupy a marginalized position in the persona of their texts? This question is also worthwhile to raise with regard to pedagogy--that is, a feminized pedagogy of care--and the extent to which women, especially writing teachers, already in a peripheralized position from the standpoint of gender and curriculum, can afford the vulnerability of personal revelation--particularly when that personal is painful or traumatic--through the text of the classroom. As documented in the work of Eileen Schell, the "personal" presentation of women writing teachers often feeds gendered stereotypes about expected sympathetic and maternal behavior from women instructors. I worry more about "crossing lines" not on general principle but if only women instructors are doing it. For me the danger is not so much Deletiner becoming the students' therapist as it is becoming their mother.

But the performance of the personal, as Summerfield suggests, needs to be placed in a larger context than Deletiner's class alone, and I would like to conclude this chapter by looking at another set of more recent responses in College English on a similar subject that, I think, points the inquiry in a broader direction. Pfeiffer hints at a cultural context in her disparaging reference to "cult of the victim," but Dan Morgan in his opinion piece, "Ethical Issues Raised by Students' Personal Writing," moves us in a far more useful direction than Pfeiffer's venom can. While many of Morgan's concerns and rhetoric echo that which we've seen previously demonstrated on this topic of the personal, he introduces in his discussion a consideration of contemporary valuing of the public personal and suggests that we must take

this context into account in our responses to student texts. As an opinion piece, his article reads as a kind of jeremiad about the changing conditions of teaching and the world in general. He clearly feels at sea with what he terms the "nontraditional lives" (321) of his students, a euphemistic reference, I suppose, to the factors of class and ethnicity in the changed demographics of public colleges and universities. But despite the sense of nostalgia for a simpler world that pervades his discussion, Morgan nonetheless puts his finger on an area worth exploring.

Before going into the conclusions he reaches in this regard, I want to describe what Morgan identifies as his ethical concerns. He describes yet another extreme case where a student wrote a "paper that disturbingly lacked remorse" (318) about a murder that he, the student, had committed. Unlike Cheryl Alton's student who had already served a jail sentence for his crime, Morgan's student had not been arrested. This added to Morgan's legal and ethical dilemma. He was advised by colleagues to contact the police, but Morgan was not convinced if what the student had confessed to had actually occurred. In his conference with the student, the student assured his instructor that the murder had indeed taken place. Still Morgan was not satisfied that he had enough evidence to take any kind of action outside of his discussion with the student, even if he wanted to go such a route. Morgan says that he and the student "negotiated a revision which would expand the narrative, clarify the thesis, define some terms, and provide the indispensable details of context" (318). The student, however, never completed the revision, and eventually

disappeared from the class.

Morgan uses this extreme example to wonder in general about the ethics of responding to personal student writing. The personal that he refers to seems to be connected to the shocking subject matter that is generated from his students' "nontraditional lives." What is interesting about Morgan's class, which is quite different from Deletiner's, is that Morgan discourages students from turning in such essays. "Why," he puzzles, "would students turn in such deeply personal essays, especially when personal revelations are unsolicited?" (321). In a response to Morgan, Lara Hooper suggests that "there seems to be a difference between professors who receive personal disclosures and those who do not. The difference . . . is the teacher's persona, that is, the attitude and personality they choose to project in the classroom" (494). In some ways it seems Hooper is saying that we get what we ask for from students, whether we realize we are asking for it or not. It may be that through his actions and attitudes, which seem thoughtful, nurturing and humane, Morgan has created a rhetorical space for exactly the kind of narrative that so confounds him.

Hooper in her comments implies that the good teacher gets to know her students personally and thus is entrusted with personal information by them. No doubt this is often true. But there is another turn to take here. To say that students see Morgan for an easy mark and "play" him would be an unnecessarily cynical oversimplification of a complex yet nonetheless performative and rhetorical phenomenon. While both Morgan and Hooper, like Deletiner, Alton and Pfeiffer, "conflate life and text" (Summerfield 164), it is possible to

see the confessions of Morgan's students as rhetorically sophisticated "readings" of the class Morgan conducts. This is borne out in Morgan's representations of his responses to these troubling texts. Throughout his piece, Morgan manifests a tension between a current-traditionalist response to writing and a more humanistic one that he senses is perhaps more on the mark for dealing with student texts. For example, he states that to address what he calls "writing issues" (by which he means things like "paragraph unity and sentence structure"), "seems cold, and, frankly, even irrelevant at a certain level." With regard to a particular student work that focused on trauma he tells us that, "as a reader, my main concern was with the student's own lifestyle, values and prospects" (320). In another case, Morgan laments that after his very careful prescription with regard to an argument assignment, a student turned in an essay about personal crisis that appeared not to be even remotely related to the topic list. Morgan has this to say:

Responding to such a paper, rather than simply returning it as a do-over, was a moral obligation nonetheless, I felt, and a challenge as well because there was more at stake than fulfilling an assignment or earning a grade. In addition to written comments, mostly of the reflective kind . . . I spent a good deal of time talking to this student . . . about the strengths of his writing, and about his staying in college despite the challenges he was still facing. (322)

In this passage and elsewhere, Morgan comes across as a caring, empathetic person whose concern and attention is

laudable. If such a passage is consistent with his public presentation of himself, isn't it likely that students understand this and, despite Morgan's disclaimers, perceive that the representation of their personally traumatic experiences are indeed, at least on some level, welcome, or at least receivable, by Morgan?

To answer the question that Morgan asks in perplexity about why students bedevil him with these narratives, perhaps we should look at the students' own stated reasons. Although this is largely absent from Morgan's recountings, (I keep wondering why he doesn't simply ask students why they write what they do), the anecdote about the murder paper reveals a hint. Morgan writes:

The paper disturbingly lacked remorse; the student explained to me later that it was intended to show what he had to do on the streets to survive. (318)

I highlight this passage because the juxtaposition of the two statements reveals the cross-purposes of the student and the teacher. The teacher is looking for a tale of remorse--that is to say a tale of reflective transformation that, as I will discuss in Chapter Four, has come to be understood as a valued rhetorical mode in the college writing class. The student, on the other hand in this account, has an idea about himself and his lived experience that he wants to represent to his teacher, and he has found a genre or tale-type with which to do it: life on the streets is hard. I am suggesting that the student's remorseless account of the murder may be viewed from a generic perspective just as a transformative coming of age story might be. Again, I emphasize that to point out the generic, performative nature of the narrative

is not the same thing as calling into question the veracity of the experience or making light of murder or the difficulties of the student's life. The murder may or may not have happened, but despite the seriousness of the subject matter, this question in and of itself is only part of the instructor's quandary. For Morgan wants to know, regardless of whether it did or did not happen, why the student made public this private, incriminating matter. Since the account lacks remorse, a psychological explanation of catharsis or a cry for help seems inadequate. What is perhaps a more plausible explanation is that the student understands the rhetorical function of the public private narrative in crafting a representation of himself that he recognizes and thinks (evidently mistakenly) his liberal professor will recognize and perhaps even appreciate.

In some ways, Morgan anticipates this explanation when he attempts to answer his own question about the prevalence of what are to him disturbingly personal narratives:

Writing about profoundly personal issues comes easily to our students because we live in a pervasive culture of public self-disclosure, as talk shows, tabloids, daily newspapers, books, and movies will attest. In our popular culture, private issues are no longer private, and public self-disclosure seems to have become a means toward personal validation. (324)

Despite the pejorative cast of Morgan's remarks about the state of culture, I think his insight is descriptively valuable, although the trend he alludes to extends further back than the mere present context. But I would add that,

more importantly, self-disclosure is also a means towards public validation, a point I think he misses in his tendency to read text as life. Self-disclosure can function as a kind of cultural capital, especially for those in a university system who are marginalized and who have little else with which to establish ethical authority in discourse. That this strategy is not new, or even lamentable as Morgan seems to think, is attested to by the existence of narratives like Harriet Jacobs's. And just as it would be a mistake to read Jacobs's narrative as only a psychological portrait, I think it is a mistake to read student "confessional" texts only as cries for help. As Morgan himself states, when teachers, confronted with writing that features trauma and dilemma, ask, "What would you like me to do? the answer is often 'Nothing'" (321). Such writing, then, is not a call for intervention in the way that Morgan and others fear (and, yes, fear is the correct word, for once again, despite his generosity with students, Morgan appears to be bothered less by the existence of personal pain and more by his having to know about it). If such writing is not a call for intervention, then perhaps it is better understood as another kind of rhetorical performance as I suggest above.

Granting this view of the public personal does not mean rejecting its therapeutic function. The two modes of understanding are not mutually exclusive. But invoking the therapeutic brings us back into Morgan's discomfort zone where he mentions many of the now familiar concerns about the qualifications of writing teachers to enact "therapy." He cites an example of a colleague who tried to dissuade a student from writing about a stalking incident. Try as she

might, the colleague could not convince the student to write about something less personal and traumatic. The student assured her teacher that the writing "would be helpful and good for her." Morgan asks, "How far do the responsibilities of a writing teacher go?" He then goes on to inform us that "As it turned out, the process of writing this paper contributed to sending the student over the edge to a nervous breakdown and hospitalization" (324). Morgan uses this incident to raise questions about the extent of the teacher's legal and ethical responsibilities with regard to foreseeable outcome. Should teachers make students sign waivers or get notes from therapists certifying that the student is healthy enough to take on such an endeavor?

His remarks prompt me to reiterate the exceptions I took to this line of thinking when Cheryl Alton raised similar questions about what we really know about our students. Morgan implies that we can't take the student's word here and invokes the therapist's authority to displace the student's. But not only is it impossible to foresee all the effects our actions will have, with or without a therapist's "guarantee," it is also a touch presumptuous to attribute so much influence to our actions. Certainly through intuition and experience a writing teacher might come to a conclusion that a student ought to stay away from a particular topic, whether it is deemed "personal" or not. But Morgan's almost cavalier remark that the writing assignment helped in "sending the student over the edge" is specious and, frankly, irresponsible in an article that purports to care deeply about responsibilities. How do we know writing the paper caused the "nervous breakdown," as he puts it? Who made this

determination? Isn't it very possible the breakdown might have occurred regardless of what the student did or didn't do in the writing class? Maybe the breakdown would have been worse if the student hadn't written the paper. If the student was so determined to write about this, isn't it likely she might have done so outside of class? It seems that a big part of the issue for Morgan is not so much what happens to the student as the fact that the teacher must know about it. I continue to question the assumption made by Morgan and others that certain "private" topics put teachers more at risk in terms of ethical dilemmas than others. While certainly in individual cases we might be able to come to conclusions about what is a "risky" topic for a student, I'm not sure we can generalize about riskiness based on our notions of "private," that is to say, those stories and materials that make teachers uncomfortable and violate their sense of what is proper to reveal. What if a student worked very hard on a "non-personal" paper but found the instructor's comments denigrating and unappreciative? What if this student were "on the edge" and the instructor's comments pushed him over? Do the ethical complexities that Morgan asserts not exist because the paper was not what he considered "personal"? This is the conundrum we enter when we treat "personal" texts as life and other texts as "mere" text. How do we know if the instructor's criteria about what ought to be concealed/revealed matches up with the student's? And how ironic that an emergent rhetoric about writing and healing, to which I will return in Chapter Three, exists side by side with a paranoia over the destructive potential of writing.

It strikes me that much of what Morgan worries about under the heading of ethics has a great deal to do with his embarrassment over hearing about certain subjects, an embarrassment he wonders if he can avoid by retreating into the epistemology of current-traditionalism--what Wendy Bishop identified as the dodge of "craft-based pedagogy." He describes a paper where a student tells a story of an alcoholic father who repeatedly abused her. The thesis of the paper is that parents are too lax these days and that "even though my father abused me, I still respect him." Morgan, appalled by this conclusion (as I am myself), questions the appropriateness of turning this paper out to the class for critique. With pity and a palpable embarrassment for the student's life, he asks: "Would it be helpful to the student to know that many people find her respect-the-father-no-matter-what conclusion appalling when so much of her life seems to be anchored on that conclusion?" (320).

The note I make in the margin here on my photocopy of Morgan's opinion piece is an unqualified yes. Yes, I think, more than helpful, it is necessary for a student, or anybody, to see where the beliefs and values of her paper fall on a social continuum. In fact, placing the paper in the social context of the writing group (with the student's understanding and cooperation) rather than have it become a private communiqué between teacher and student strikes me as precisely the right action to take. For as Morgan states, "this student . . . does not appear to be in crisis or asking, even indirectly, for intervention or rescue." Although it is impossible to make any evaluations without

having the text and context of the paper available to us, I suspect that there is a disjunction between the student's rhetorical use of the personal and Morgan's reception of it. Morgan wonders if it is "appropriate for an *English teacher* to nudge a student toward rethinking the traumas of her life? Or should the teacher focus on writing issues such as paragraph unity and sentence structure?" (320) [original emphasis]." But the student's essay, according to Morgan's description, seems to have a social and rhetorical dimension that Morgan sees fit to ignore through his exclusively psychological reading. The essay seeks to comment on the cultural practices of discipline and child-rearing, topics that I have dealt with in my own composition classes as social issues that invoke what Morgan would term personal reactions and experience. Morgan's two choices of response--psychological intervention or craft-based pedagogy--seem inadequate. Indeed I have trouble understanding Morgan's dilemma here. By connecting her experience to a larger cultural concern, I would argue that the student marks the paper for public discourse. But it is Morgan's sense of bourgeois privacy that prevents her writing from entering the public domain and instead insists on locating it in personal trauma.

Such a move conflicts with contemporary understanding of trauma. Cathy Caruth points out that trauma is not merely psychological or private but has social and historical dimensions. If a student wrote about and justified, say, her father's racism in the way Morgan's student justifies her father's alcoholism and abuse, how would Morgan's question sound: "Would it be helpful to the student to know that many

people find her respect-the-father-no-matter-what conclusion appalling when so much of her life seems to be anchored on that conclusion?" Perhaps because we see racism as a public issue, a trauma with social and historical dimensions, we might be more willing to allow such a narrative to be disrupted in the public domain of the classroom. But there is no reason to think that such a process would be any less difficult or painful.

I, too, would no doubt be disturbed by the conclusions the student reaches in her paper because they conflict with my own sensibilities. I would probably be happier, more comfortable, if, in telling her story, she came to a different conclusion about the disciplining of children, a conclusion that speaks through the ethical authority of having experienced abuse in order to condemn it. Or perhaps a neat morality tale about the evils of alcoholism to which the student through experiential authority can attest. But wait a minute. Would I be happier? What narrative am I/is Morgan looking for? Perhaps the student's text is more complicated than the simplistic read Morgan gives it as a representation of a pitiable, dysfunctional, unreflective life. What if the text were attempting to do something more complex than condemn alcoholism and abuse, facile points when you come to think about it? I think of Dorothy Allison's novel Bastard Out of Carolina, a brave book that resists vilifying the abusers and the alcoholics and instead presents situations filled with ambiguities. Morgan's reading of his student's work denies it the possibility of grappling with something similarly complex--perhaps that one could go through the experience of domestic violence yet still be able

to identify that there are overly permissive parents and children who need discipline. Or that one could still find things to love and respect in an alcoholic father. Or that one's upbringing affects one's views on social practices. By labeling it a muddled narrative of illogic and personal trauma and relegating it exclusively to the private domain, Morgan perhaps not only misjudges the student's intentions but misses the public potential of the text.

Morgan is perplexed that so many of these personal essays "do not involve . . . a direct cry for 'help,' but, rather, blunt disclosure of personal experiences, and personal conclusions about those often astonishing experiences" (321). That the "cry for help" is missing suggests the inadequacy of subjecting such texts only to the psychological paradigm to which Morgan and others are predisposed in their thinking. Perhaps such texts are better viewed through a lens that is more understanding of their public nature. Susan Jarratt has called for a more rhetorical enactment of composition, one that allows for "a model of political conflict and negotiation" (42). Maybe such a rhetorical model, rather than the exclusively therapeutic or psychological, would bring an added dimension to our consideration of personal narratives in the college writing class. But within this rhetoric there certainly may be room for the therapeutic, perhaps a rhetorical therapeutic rather than a psychological one, one that "has a power that is beyond analysis" (Brent 92), where writers craft provisional public/private identities for a variety of effects and purposes that are both healing and persuasive.

As I continue my exploration of first person writing, I

will look further at the public and critical dimensions of such texts, their potential as cultural criticism, and the way this public dimension inflects the crafting of subjectivity within the text. In the next chapter, I consider a specific type of first-person writing that is commonly assigned in freshman and other college writing classes: the literacy/educational narrative where students are asked to construct their histories and relationships to language. Such an assignment deliberately seeks to have students place their personal lives in public contexts and serves as a mediation of the two spheres. In Chapter Two, I will discuss what forces go into the shaping and reception of such mediated texts and the nature of the subjectivity that is elicited through their construction.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Schlafly's summary is accurate as compared to the actual language of the amendment. In fact, with the exception of some minor changes that contribute to readability for a lay audience, Schlafly has reproduced the text of the actual amendment here (see "United States 1232h Protection of Pupil Rights").

<sup>2</sup> The alternative to "personal" writing in the college classroom is often conceived of in terms of teaching "academic discourse" as a means of empowering students. Students are instructed in the conventions of reading and writing the language of the academy, the language they will need to know to succeed in college and thus to accrue the social and economic benefits of such success. Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae, in a series of articles published in CCC, carried out a debate regarding the place of academic discourse in the teaching of writing. Elbow advocated the merits of what is often known as expressivism (writing closely connected to personal narrative), and Bartholomae derided such "sentimental realism" ("Writing" 67) as a mode in which college students need not learn to write.

## Chapter 2

## Literacy Composed: the Educational Narrative of Development

. . . I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out (42).

Frederick Douglass

I feel education is important. Everyone should do good and also try their best. Nobody should not take advantage of education. Some people want to go to school, but they can't. Education is important for our future.

A high school student after reading  
Narrative of the Life of Frederick  
Douglass (quoted in Adisa 42)

In Chapter One I argued that attention to composing processes has spurred as much interest in the development of the writer as in the development of the writer's text. The paradigm shift to process within composition and rhetoric coincides with a broader cultural trajectory that values (or perhaps exploits) the private story as a form of public knowledge. It is not surprising then that classroom writing assignments would reflect these trends, and as discussed in Chapter One, some critics have argued that they have come to do so to a distressing degree. Connors ("Personal") charts from the nineteenth century onwards an increasing turn towards writing assignments that tap into the cultural validity of the public personal. But the efflorescence of composition studies in the latter part of the twentieth century is marked not only by a (sometimes contested) interest in personal writing in general but also by writing that attempts to chart the writer's process or, perhaps more accurately, progress as a developing, authoring subject.

Such metacognitive writing has come to occupy a significant place in process pedagogy, an outcome that is

consistent with the discipline's interest in the writer's evolving subjectivity. (Indeed, the very idea of process is steeped in an epistemology of metacognition, as evidenced by the studies on composing that made visible--and thus an object for scrutiny--the unseen cognitive dimensions of writing.) Part of writing well has come to mean becoming aware of one's self as a writer. Within freshman writing programs, it has, for instance, become a fairly common practice to ask students to write about writing process for portfolio submissions or semester-end reflections. Often, as in the case of Berthoff's double-entry notebook, writing assignments seek to foster metatextual writing that heightens students' awareness of themselves as thinkers/writers/readers and their intellectual relationship to text and subject matter. For example, interest in the personal essay as a viable rhetorical alternative to college thesis writing stems in many cases from the genre's reliance on self-conscious reflection, "the self wondering out loud" as Montaigne put it, and narrative subjectivity (see Chapter Four).

Conceptions of critical thinking, another staple of composition's process movement, are also connected to metacognition, as suggested in Kuhar's definition of critical thinking: "thinking about thinking" (80). The perception of the primacy of metacognitive activity to writing and critical thinking is further evoked by Berthoff when she asserts that "thinking which does not include thinking about thinking is . . . an activity carried out very well by trouts" ("Higher Order" 743). While the meaning of the term critical thinking is itself contested within education and composition studies (L. Hill 49), social epistemic versions, such as those

inspired by Dewey or Freire, often imply an element of hyper-consciousness, a knowing that one knows, about the inquiring self and the place that self occupies in the world. Such theories have significantly affected the direction of composition, as, for example, Fishman and McCarthy have demonstrated with regard to Dewey's influence on the field.

In this chapter on literacy narratives, I take pains to point out the place of the metacognitive in writing studies because I think the pedagogical rationale for literacy and educational narratives derives from a metacognitive bent that implicitly concerns itself with personal narrative and subjectivity. From a field that often prizes self-conscious reflection, social engagement, process and praxis emerges the metacognitive genre of the literacy narrative. Perhaps nowhere more perfectly does composition's interest in student subjectivity and development reveal itself than in this assignment, where students are typically invited to narrate and reflect on their experiences with language, especially writing and reading, both in and outside of the classroom. The literacy narrative concerns the "ongoing, social process of language acquisition" (Eldred and Mortensen 512), and, I would add, in the case of college writing, specifically the student's relationship to and reflection on that process.

Such assignments, inevitably grounded in first-person narration, clearly are consistent with the valuing of personal experience as a legitimate form of public knowledge. Indeed the literacy narrative, and its variations that focus more broadly on student educational experience, wed the two themes that have figured importantly in the teaching of college writing as discussed in Chapter One: self-actualizing

development and a reliance on the personal as a source of rhetorical invention. The literacy narrative, a "school genre" like the five-paragraph essay, reflects these themes. It is no accident that, except as portions of longer autobiographical works, literacy narratives don't usually appear in writing done outside the classroom (Smit). The above-mentioned trends in process writing pedagogies have lent themselves to the adaptation of a form that celebrates an evolving, reflective, public private self.

As I will discuss in this chapter, literacy narratives, at their best, aim to help students interrogate the public placement of their private selves through a critical examination of literacy and educational practices. In so doing, students may not only arrive at a more critical understanding of these practices through a reading of their own literacy acquisition, but they may also come to see their literate selves as socially inflected and thus determined by or resistant to prevailing standards of literacy and education. According to Wendy Bishop, such narratives are often viewed as "a place where you can look at and critique your schooling and challenge your education" ("Subject" 67). Pursuing this line of narrative inquiry can lead students to a critical appreciation of the political and social role of language in general. As Mary Jane Dickerson speculates,

. . . when students develop a voice they can identify as their own through its embodiment in a piece of writing that recreates their world and those voices that inhabit that world, they are well on their way toward the empowerment that enables them to meet the constant challenges of reading and

writing their own histories and those written by others. (Dickerson)

Advocates of the genre thus attribute critical pedagogical properties to the first-person narrative investigation of literacy, as students create representations of their experience for analysis and location in a greater cultural narrative.

But Dickerson's above reference to the *raison d'être* for literacy narratives reveals what I believe is another tacit feature of the genre, one which may at times be at odds with the function of cultural criticism. The vehicle of the literacy narrative itself is often inflected by a progressive narrative of liberatory development that shapes the knowledge the narrative reveals. While students may, through reflection on and theorizing of their acquisition of literacy, come to a critical understanding of the seminal role of language in human experience, I think the *Bildung* nature of the developmental narrative can, as often as not, steer the story away from critical insight, that is to say away from a questioning and problematizing of what literacy and education are. Instead of critiquing the structures in which literacy acquisition is embedded, students, impelled by the developmental momentum of the genre, create heroic tales that are mimeses of prevailing hegemonic conceptions of literacy.

Since the literacy narrative is insufficiently modeled outside the domain of the classroom writing assignment, students, in an effort to decipher this school genre, graft their stories onto an existing narrative with which they are familiar: what Eldred and Mortensen call the "romanticized

power of education" where "a flower girl can become a duchess through education." Eldred and Mortensen point out that the cultural "promises of literacy are so great and so compelling that it seems impossible to argue against it" and that "Like many other professions, ours (English studies) is inspired by a certain kind of disciplinary romance" (515) where we place faith in the abstraction that language, like knowledge, is empowering. Too often, perhaps, we forget to ask with regard to this empowerment: how, in what way, for whom and at whose expense? Students, in an adept reading of their teacherly audience, produce narratives that reaffirm the vein that runs through much of process writing pedagogy: the belief in humanistic development through writing and reading.

The phenomenon I am describing may be viewed as a microcosm of a larger process that Lester Faigley has observed as taking place in writing instruction (see Chapter Four). As Faigley puts it, our profession has adopted a view in which "success in teaching depends on making a student aware of the desired subject position she will occupy" (129). As a result, Faigley argues, we often (perhaps unwittingly) elicit from students (and so reward them for producing) personal narratives that display a decorously reflective middle class subjectivity. Indeed student selves become like the drafts writing instruction compels of its pupils: evolving and revised. Literacy and educational narratives that rely on a theme of the romanticized power of education are merely a sub-genre of this larger category of developmental narrative bearing witness to an evolving self. Students, in telling the stories of their literacy education, may produce testimony that bolsters the hopes to which many

writing teachers cling, that which Mortensen and Eldred have identified as the "literacy myth": "that better literacy . . . leads to economic development, cultural progress, and individual improvement" (512).

In order to explore this idea further, I refer to a volume edited by Wendy Bishop that contains examples of college-level student literacy narratives (The Subject Is Reading), which, to my mind, are conspicuously devoid of the potentially critical dimension ascribed to such writings. I am struck by the similarities between these student essays in Bishop's volume and those which Faigley critiques in Coles's and Vopat's What Makes Writing Good. In his analysis, Faigley deconstructs the criteria of "honesty" by which student personal essays are often judged to be exemplary. For Faigley, such writings praised for this so-called honest quality are often narratives marked by middle class details that constitute "a series of recognitions for a college English teacher" (125). What's more, the narrating consciousnesses of the essays, like the English teachers who are the audience, seem unaware of their imbrication in this middle class discourse. As with the Coles and Vopat examples, I find the essays in Bishop's volume to display a lack of awareness of their constituting details. And while the narratives are deficient in critical edge, they often fall back on and reaffirm the developmental line of the romanticized power of education.

The examples reproduced in Bishop's collection, despite their reflection on the acquisition of literacy, remain fairly unprobing with regard to the subject position of the student, which seems to be a relatively privileged one. One

of the narratives, for example, describes a college phone call home to the student's mother and indicates that he concludes "the conversation by explaining that I would definitely need some money soon" (62), a scenario which reproduces the sitcom stereotype of the spoiled, middle class college student dependent on and entitled to a reservoir of parental funds. When the narratives touch on potential social context, the salient points are not pursued, as in one narrative which remarks without further comment, "I'm one of those Generation X'ers who grew up watching television because their parents were too involved in their own problems to have much time for them" (10). This same narrative later asserts with regard to parents' imposition of reading material: "My parents always gave me some lame bullshit explanation about building character and learning responsibility. I never understood what they were talking about, but I'll probably tell my son the same thing" (11). This failure to interrogate in a sustained way occurs elsewhere in other areas as well, as in the narrative that attempts to explain what was the writer's "lighthearted approach to reading" (60). In this context, she casually mentions, and then drops, the fact that the student's father, after her inability to pass a flashcard quiz he had given her, "came into my room, picked up my chair from the desk, and chucked it through the wall. The hole remains." She tells us that what she learned from this experience was "to have my mother quiz me the next time" (61).

But while the narratives fall short on evincing an explicit, critical understanding of literacy (or other social issues), they do often contain markers of self-actualizing

development, what Eldred and Mortensen connect to the "literacy myth" of intellectual and social progress. A diagnosed dyslexic student observes that "Looking back on the days I had to learn to read, I realized that I learned a lot more than just reading. I learned to struggle and survive" (35). Another student concludes her story with:

Since I have started reading more, I have found that reading makes me a more intelligent person and has helped improve my writing skills. I feel that reading, depending on what type of reading it is, makes me think and be more creative with my mind. . . . I have now learned that reading is not something to be afraid of because I can be taken into a whole different world with reading. (25)

This same student kindly, tentatively acknowledges earlier in the narrative that "my English 101 class may have had an impact on my reading and writing skills also" (24). While she pays homage to the mind-expanding nature of reading and writing, she seems unable to go beyond the cliché to explain what the "whole different world" is that she enters. Even an essay entitled "Learning How Not to Read" that displays a somewhat cynical, irreverent attitude towards school and literacy (the same one mentioned above that describes literacy in relation to an ineluctable parent-child cycle of "bullshit character-building") redeems itself with a final observation of humility that demonstrates deference to the sacred phenomenon of literacy:

Now I've come to realize that reading, as well as studying the text, is the only thing that can help me succeed on the tests. This is not to say that

my avoidance of reading did nothing for me. On the contrary, I believe it has helped me to achieve the level of reading that I now enjoy. I just realize that now it is time for a completely different approach: doing it right the first time. (13)

Is there something about the literacy/educational narrative (indeed narrative as a popular genre in general) that wants the kitsch of the happy ending, one that places the subject in the mature, empowered position of personal responsibility that the myth of literacy stakes out as its claim? It seems plausible that inviting students to meditate on their experiences with school and language would foster critique. But while certainly such narratives can provide platforms for producing cultural criticism, the conclusion is far from foregone. Why? What accounts for the failure of the students' narratives in Bishop's collection to achieve the full critical potential that teachers such as Dickerson and Bishop hold out for such writing? This question is somewhat naive given the institutional context in which the writing is taking place. It makes sense that inevitably grade-conscious students try to write what they think their evaluator wants them to write, and it might take some doing on the students' part to come to the counter-intuitive awareness that critiquing establishment practices of literacy is acceptable or desirable:

The teacher who advocates exploratory, student-centered, speak-for-yourself writing may simply seem to complicate the requirements [of evaluation], to have a more complex or submerged agenda, and to appear still more directive and

intrusive a pedagogical presence than other teachers who have gone before (needing to fly in the face of so much the student must presumably unlearn). (Otte 148)

Perhaps students as savvy readers of their audience tap into the romance that English teachers value surrounding education and the power of reading and writing to produce what students think will be acceptable stories for a school assignment. Perhaps this same romance short-circuits students' ability to question their relationship with the institutions that purvey this myth of literacy. While the literacy narrative as it is often assigned may be the school genre that Smit suggests, it nonetheless bears similarities to other narratives of development with which students are acquainted. The rules of the developmental genre, generated from an ideology of autonomous individualism, call forth a structure outlining a series of engagements marked by difficulties but ultimately finishing with a celebration of humanistic triumph, the subject moved into a position of hard-won insight. That students at such tender ages can manage to adapt their life stories to this paradigm of struggle and rectification attests to the evocative power of the pattern.

In order to see the force of this hero's quest at work in classroom discourse, I turn now to an analysis of a text that I see as being inextricably linked to the educational/literacy narrative as it is practiced in classroom assignments. The text I am speaking of is the 1845 Narrative of Frederick Douglass and the account of literacy acquisition contained there. Douglass's Narrative often

shows up in college writing courses, and the text is no stranger to the freshman comp class or the high school humanities curriculum. Many teachers credit this text with enormous pedagogical potential, seeing it as a means to bring out for their students "the best of who we are and what we can become" (Brown x). While I agree that the Narrative is an extraordinary text and that students certainly benefit by being acquainted with Douglass's work, I question the way the passages regarding Douglass's account of his literacy acquisition are understood by teachers and students alike. Simplifications and misreadings of these crucial passages attest to the pervasiveness of the literacy myth and its coloring of our interpretive lenses. By looking at the way students respond to this text, I think we can gain insight into the way students experience requests to write about their own literacy and education.

To provide a glimpse into how Douglass translates in the classroom and into our students' understanding, I turn to The Teachers and Writers Guide to Frederick Douglass. This volume, edited by Wesley Brown, contains descriptions of a range of classrooms in which the Narrative is the featured text. Brown tells us in the preface that "Our thinking [in assembling the collection] was that Douglass's story of 'how a slave was made a man' and the importance of literacy to gaining his freedom might prompt visually oriented young people to look upon the written word as more worthy of their attention" (ix). Elsewhere Susan Willis reports that, in a classroom situation, Brown wanted to have a discussion with a group of students

". . . of the importance of reading and writing in

life of someone to whom it was prohibited--the great value of writing and reading, and how Douglass did it under enormous pressure and at risk of life and limb." He (Brown) wanted to jar the students a little, to have them look at literacy not as a chore, but as something precious, a gift.

(92)

Brown evidently sees in the text an occasion for didacticism that is no doubt appealing to many educators and part of their motive for bringing Douglass into the writing class: students who take literacy for granted will read about a man who had to fight for it and, as a result, will be roused from their complacency regarding the written word and its power to uplift. Figured in this way, Douglass's literacy narrative becomes a morality tale, a way of shaming lackadaisical pupils into an appreciation for what they have, especially African-American and other minority students, and at the same time reaffirming our cultural literacy myth.

Many of the essays in Brown's collection stress the importance of reading and writing to personal development, both moral and intellectual. As Alfred E. Prettyman states in his chapter called "Frederick Douglass: A Developing Self," "The ability to write was essential to his (Douglass's) self-development, essential to his true freedom" (83). There is no question that in this text Douglass does indeed configure literacy as an essential component to his idea of freedom, and certainly this construction warrants scrutiny. In fact, I am suggesting that such scrutiny will yield a more complicated view of literacy and freedom than is often gleaned in the classroom, one that challenges in

certain respects the dominant literacy myth. By way of contrast to this more complex reading of Douglass, I now look more closely at some of the chapters in Brown's collection to further elucidate the way teachers deploy Douglass and the way students receive him. By so doing, I hope to show that we are as often as not working with a truncated understanding of Douglass that is both a reflection and reinscription of dominant views of literacy. I speculate that these views, as derived from Douglass and other sources, impede students' ability to adopt critical stances towards literacy in their own narratives.

In a chapter called "Knowledge is Power," Lorenzo Thomas describes his successful experiences using the Narrative with college students. He tells us that he presents the book to his students as a "gift" that "is precious" in its "ability to whet the appetite for knowledge" (7). In this sentence and in his title, Thomas makes clear that he sees Douglass's text as a celebration of the salubrious effects of literacy and education on the individual. He elaborates:

college students marvel that a man sentenced to illiteracy, a man who literally stole his education, can send them to the dictionary on every other page and startle them with the beautiful logic of his phrasing. This last reaction is the reason that I assign the book. Indeed the appetite for knowledge is the subject of this book. . . . the work is a narrative of self-discovery. Compared to that theme, the author's graphic account of "the gross fraud, wrong, and inhumanity of slavery" is secondary. (2)

I don't think Thomas is wrong in seeing Douglass's story as being about self-discovery or as exceeding the generic boundaries of abolitionist propaganda. Literary critics such as Donald Gibson have made precisely this claim, noting that Douglass's account is indeed in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*. Douglass's representation distinguishes itself from other slave narratives, according to Gibson, through its added psychological dimension and, as a result, achieves a breakthrough literary status. What I do question here is the reduction of this psychological portrait and its conception of literacy and empowerment to "the appetite for knowledge." In making this leap, I think Thomas elides the nuances in Douglass's portrayal and confines the narrative to the safety of literacy myth. Thomas goes on to emphasize this view when he cites William McFeeley's description of the effect the Columbian Orator had on Douglass: "If he could say words . . . say them correctly, say them beautifully-- Frederick could act; he could matter in the world" (3). Likewise in reference to the remediation of Douglass's "inadequate writing skills," Thomas quotes Benjamin Quarles: "this unschooled person had penned his autobiography. Such an achievement furnished an object lesson; it hinted at the infinite potentialities of man in whatever station of life. . . ." (4). These assertions match the assumption of "economic development, cultural progress, and individual improvement" that our literacy myth links to reading and writing (Eldred and Mortensen 512) and thus, taken by themselves, such assertions limit the narrative's scope to an homage celebrating the indomitable spirit of the individual against impossible odds.

The tendency in the lessons described in the Teachers and Writers volume is to present Douglass's experience as universal and emblematic of the human condition in general, an experience that students can identify with by viewing Douglass's hardships metonymically in relation to human suffering and desire. The result is a dilution of Douglass's cultural criticism to favor a decontextualized, developmental narrative. Lester Faigley describes a parallel dilution in his discussion of a writing textbook's treatment of a John Edgar Wideman essay. Wideman talks about his still unabated anger regarding a conversation he had in college with a white student who criticized his taste in rhythm and blues. The textbook gloss tells students that the selection leads "us beyond Wideman's personal story, helping us to generalize from his particular experience. Indeed, autobiography should not only provide insight into one person's life but also teach us about human experience in general" (Faigley 160). But Faigley asks

What is the universal lesson to be drawn from Wideman's questions? . . . Translating Wideman's rage into a lesson on human experience in general becomes a way of avoiding his particular experience and of not seeing the pervasive racism he encountered. Allowing students to respond, "Yes, I've been angry too, and that's a universal emotion" permits them not to examine why Wideman's anger is so debilitating . . . why he still carries that anger after many years have passed. If there is a universal lesson to be drawn from the treatment of Wideman's narrative . . ., perhaps it

is how easily the experiences of those who are different from us can be appropriated. (160)

Using the 1845 Narrative didactically in the classroom, rendering it "an object lesson," accomplishes the appropriation of Douglass's story to the effect of bolstering liberal conceptions of literacy as a matter of individual struggle and reward. Douglass thus is a heroic figure with iconic status, an example to be emulated. As Charles Kuner writes in "Using Douglass's Narrative as Motivation for Student Writing" (his contribution to the Brown volume), ". . . I show [the students] that they can have better control of their destiny by empowering themselves with better literacy skills" (70), and the Narrative ". . . also shows them the link between literacy and personal empowerment, that they, too, can overcome personal obstacles and become the masters of their own fates" (72).

This view of the Narrative as "lesson" is underscored in a chapter by Opal Palmer Adisa. Adisa very usefully supplies high school students' written responses to Douglass's words that demonstrate the moralistic way students receive Douglass as an embodiment of the power of education. Adisa herself states her purpose for teaching the Narrative as follows: "My major objective is to use literature to stir students to write about their own lives so that they might recognize their worth and find more meaningful ways to direct their energies, the way Frederick Douglass did" (35). One student writes the following after reading the Narrative:

I think education is very important, and because my ancestors had to sneak to learn to read and write, I feel that as a young black person, it is my duty

to learn everything I can and that people want to teach me. . . . But what makes me mad are those people who don't take advantage of what the teacher tries to teach them. I try to learn everything of whatever is being taught. I really believe that is the only way to succeed in life as a black person. Because one thing they were never able to take was our minds. (42)

That Douglass's achievement was enormous is of course not in dispute, and that he should serve as a role model for African-Americans or any young people in and of itself is by no means objectionable. However, here as elsewhere, a price is paid for the iconic status Douglass is granted, that price being principally the reduction (or perhaps expansion) of the Narrative itself to the figure of Douglass as representation of the power of literacy. Jeanne Gunner, building on Foucault's insight of the "author function," defines iconic discourse as operating conservatively "according to certain laws, always in relation to the iconic text and figure" (3). She juxtaposes "iconic discourse" with "critical discourse," deeming the latter to be transgressive and contrasting it with the former. Douglass's assumption of iconic status results in, I believe, a conservative absorption of the depiction of his relationship to literacy as represented in the Narrative. The discourse here surrounding Douglass's iconic figure both gives authority to and is bolstered by the literacy myth as defined earlier. This process occurs at the expense of unearthing the critical view of literacy that I believe Douglass's text exposes.

Certain aspects of the Narrative do seem in accordance

with the cultural belief that equates literacy with unqualified moral and intellectual evolution. As many of the contributors to The Teachers and Writers Guide note, Douglass grants a significant role to literacy in helping him conceive of himself as a free man. As a result of learning to read, Douglass asserts,

The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness. Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in every thing. . . . I saw nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled in every calm, breathed in every wind, and moved in every storm.

(43)

Such passages lend credence to the grandiose claims of ennoblement and mind expansion made in the name of literacy. But Douglass's relationship to literacy and freedom is far more complex than what can be allowed for in the literacy myth. Preceding the above passage, Douglass describes himself as being in a state of existential despair: ". . . that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish" (42).

On a psychological level, Douglass's literacy acquisition is an embattled and bitter-sweet process and a far cry from the liberatory discourse that characterizes popular understandings of knowledge and empowerment. Indeed, at this moment in the story, knowledge disempowers Douglass, as he tells us, ". . . I envied my fellow-slaves for their

stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Any thing, no matter what, to get rid of thinking!" (43). Ironically, by his own account, it is this sense of disempowerment that ultimately leads him out of slavery. Douglass's torment stems from his burgeoning understanding that reading alone is not enough to deliver him from slavery; reading provides "no ladder" (42). In this sense, it is the realization of the limitations of literacy that spurs Douglass on to his quest for both psychological and material emancipation. Something else, he understands, must happen if he is to become free.

This lack is further emphasized in the recounting of his reading of The Columbian Orator. As previously mentioned, William McFeeley interprets Douglass's reaction to the Orator as: "If he could say words . . . say them correctly, say them beautifully--Frederick could act; he could matter in the world" (quoted in Thomas 3). Certainly Douglass does credit his reading here with expanding his understanding of the moral abhorrence of slavery. He states that "The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery . . ." (42). But once again Douglass expresses a contradiction in his attitude towards literacy and its effects. Among the Orator passages that Douglass refers to is one that describes a Socratic dialogue between a master and a slave: "The slave was made to say some very smart as well as impressive things in reply to his master--things which had the desired though unexpected effect; for the conversation resulted in the voluntary emancipation of the slave on the part of the master" (42). In this scenario, the slave, through the power

of having been educated, is able to use words to effect emancipation. Of course, this state of affairs contrasts sharply with Douglass's own story, and he expresses his skepticism here about the "unexpected effect" of this "voluntary emancipation." The description of the dialogue at this juncture in the text thus speaks a wry commentary on the "power" of knowledge and words to end oppression.

And yet literacy is, without doubt, essential to ending Douglass's mentality of enslavement, for he clearly states, upon hearing Master Auld's prohibition on reading that "From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom" (36). But it is important here, I would argue, to understand this statement as applying to Douglass in his particular circumstances and not to the power of literacy in general. Not everyone who is literate in the text experiences the enlightenment that Douglass does. For example, literacy, paralleling religion, brings no enlightenment to the slave owners of course. And neither does it to the poor white children whom Douglass bribes and tricks into teaching him his letters. Perhaps more importantly, knowledge does not bring these young people power. Douglass sets up an interesting comparison between himself and the children when he describes his encounters with these "urchins." In so doing, the text again calls into question prevailing assumptions about education and empowerment that are at the heart of our cultural literacy myth. Douglass tells us that, ". . . bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me the more valuable bread of knowledge" (41). While Douglass deems knowledge more valuable than bread here, I again

suggest that we can read this as applying to his particular case rather than a humanistic statement about literacy in general. For clearly according to Douglass's own description the actual bread is more valuable to the urchins than the knowledge they possess: they have knowledge but no food to eat. Knowledge, which is lawfully theirs, does not improve their condition; does not benefit them in the same way that knowledge, gained illegally, will ultimately benefit Douglass. What accounts for this difference?

My answer to this question comes from an examination of the psychological and material conditions under which Douglass tells us he became compelled to discover his literacy. The Narrative, I have suggested, as sometimes used in classroom contexts, may induce an implicit shame in students who have taken for granted what Douglass so struggled for. The logic of the literacy myth suggests that if Douglass had to beg, borrow, steal to acquire his education, how much more should students be able to achieve when this gift of literacy has been so readily offered, if only they would take advantage of the given opportunities? Douglass's inclusion of the poor white children in the Narrative acts as a counter to such logic. An aspect of the critical view of literacy that the Narrative affords us is that education in and of itself will not lead to psychological or material remedy.

This truth is further underscored in the description of the encounter with the slave-breaker Covey, where Douglass for the first time puts up physical resistance to his enslavers. David Leverenz has discussed this passage as important to Douglass's psychological liberation in terms of

its effects on masculinity. But I think this section of the text is equally part of Douglass's literacy narrative, as its inclusion shows the limits of literacy to self-development. Quite in opposition to a literacy myth that values words over violence, Douglass declares the importance of physical resistance to his developing consciousness. Unequivocally, Douglass announces that "This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave . . . and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact" (74). The *coup de grace* then in ending his mental enslavement is not literacy but in fact physical violence.

Certainly education helped prime Douglass for this pivotal moment, and he provides us with an answer as to why literacy did matter so much for him when it seemed to have such little effect on the consciousnesses of the poor whites. He makes a point of telling us that seminal to his literacy experience was the understanding that reading and writing were denied to him. Master Auld, upon hearing of Mistress Auld's transgression, proclaims that, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. . . . Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. . . . It would forever unfit him to be a slave. . . . It would make him discontented and unhappy." It is at this point that Douglass has his realization about "the pathway from slavery to freedom." He goes on to explain,

It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it. Whilst I was saddened by the thought of losing the aid of my kind mistress, I was gladdened by the invaluable

instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master. Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with a high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. . . . In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both. (36-7)

Here Douglass emphatically tells us that the progressive act of literacy instruction offered by the benevolently-intended mistress would not have been enough to incur the dramatic change of consciousness that was necessary for him to acquire freedom. Hence, once again, Douglass provides us with an example where literacy devoid of a critical dimension is insufficient to produce the liberatory effects so often attributed to it.

Instead the outcome of Douglass's literacy is intrinsically connected to the conflicted conditions under which it was acquired. Before her corruption, Mistress Auld, in a paradigm consistent with the literacy myth, occupies the position of the liberal educator in relation to Douglass, bestowing literacy upon him as a gift in order to foster self-improvement in the unfortunate slave. But for Douglass the desire for literacy does not become connected to critical consciousness until he hears Master Auld's "inch/ell" pronouncement. Douglass later appropriates the Master's figure of speech, both metaphorically and literally, to express his critical relationship to literacy: "The first step had been taken. Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet,

had given me the *inch*, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the *ell*" (40). Douglass's ironic identification with and subsequent subversive owning of the trope is significant to understanding his relationship to literacy in general. For the narrative itself can be understood as a product of "transculturation," as Mary Louise Pratt has used the term in "Arts of the Contact Zone."

In her article, Pratt discusses the production of texts as they occur in "social spaces [contact zones] where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths . . ." (34). She employs the term *transculturation* from ethnographic studies "to describe processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture" as distinguished from the terms *acculturation* or *assimilation* (36). Pratt sees *transculturation* as resulting in the *autoethnographic* text,

. . . in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them. Thus if ethnographic texts are those in which European metropolitan subjects represent to themselves their others (usually their conquered others), *autoethnographic* texts are representations that the so-defined others construct in response to or in dialogue with those texts. (35)

As Auld represents Douglass with his aphorism, Douglass represents himself, in a "dialogue" with that original representation (a dialogue that is very different from the

rational master/slave dialogue of the Orator, which Douglass skeptically recounts for the reader). And so the narrative, like the representation of literacy within it, is not assimilationist but rather autoethnographic, involving "a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms . . . to create self-representations intended to intervene in metropolitan modes of understanding" (35).

This conflicted model of literacy that Douglass presents in opposition to liberal, assimilationist conceptions of reading, writing, and education is also understandable in terms of "crisis," as Shoshana Felman uses the term to describe her work with teaching Holocaust testimony. Felman asks, "Is there a relation between crisis and the very enterprise of education?" (13). She later answers this question by saying

teaching . . . takes place precisely only through a crisis: if teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of an (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps not truly taught: it has passed on some facts, passed on some information and some documents, with which . . . the recipients . . . can for instance do what people during the occurrence of the Holocaust precisely did with information that kept coming forth but no one could recognize, and that no one could therefore truly learn, read or put to use. (55)

Douglass's story contrasts with that put forth in the liberal understanding of literacy because it occurs in the

kind of crisis that Felman references. Without the crisis of prohibition, the embattled conditions under which the slave encounters education, Douglass might have acquired information, might have learned his letters from Mistress Auld, but without knowing how to read or to recognize, in the critical sense that Felman suggests. The autoethnographic text that Douglass produces is by definition a conflicted one that cannot be called forth by nurturance alone, as represented in the pre-corrupted Mistress's attempts to give the gift of literacy. In effect, Douglass's model is telling us that literacy cannot be given in that sense; rather it must be taken if it is to produce the critical consciousness that leads to emancipation. While "giving" implies passivity, "taking" suggests an active, crisis-induced relationship to language and education.

Douglass's version of the literacy story then contrasts markedly with that contained in the iconic representation often offered to students. This conservative "misreading" by teachers and students alike of Douglass attests to the power of the literacy myth and its influence over the reception and production of texts concerned with representations of literacy and education. It is not surprising that students would reproduce this hegemonic version of literacy in their own narratives surrounding language and education. I think an important question for composition studies to ask is under what conditions do people and texts begin to interrogate prevailing assumptions about literacy? How can the literacy narrative help position the writer into a critical stance vis à vis the culture of language and education? What does an exploration of these two questions tell us in general about

the role of first-person writing in the classroom and its relation to cultural criticism?

In her work with literacy narratives, Mary Soliday has identified what she sees as students entering into a critical dialogue with understandings of literacy through telling the stories of their experience with language. For Soliday, "An author of a successful literacy story goes beyond recounting 'what happened' to foreground the distance between an earlier and a present self conscious of living in time" (514). The logic Soliday uses here is similar to that espoused by those who champion the personal essay as a useful and appropriate pedagogical genre for college writers: the narrative subjectivity of the essay form lends itself to a productive, self-conscious reflection on the part of the persona and, by extension, the writer. The collapsing of the distinction between text and writer that I see as stemming from composition's concern with student subjectivity is something I will take up again in Chapters Three and Four. For now I, along with Soliday, sidestep this issue in order to focus on the textual productions that she sees as being critically positioned.

Soliday is interested in how ". . . writers use literacy narratives to acknowledge the conflicts they face within dominant cultures and, ultimately, to develop a version of difference that is personally usable" (516). She chronicles her student Alisha's responses to texts that Soliday believes focus on questions of assimilation and hybridity with regard to language and identity. Alisha discusses the differing contexts and applications of language use and comes to the conclusion: "It's funny to say, but English can be several

different languages combined together. That's why when asked if I speak English I say: 'I speak many Englishes' (517).

Soliday believes that

In the vein of contemporary autobiographers like Maxine Hong Kingston and Audre Lorde, Alisha squarely confronts the issue of hybridized identity; her dilemma is how she can learn to become a fluent speaker of "many Englishes" without becoming "a stranger to" herself. Where [Richard] Rodriguez splits himself into two selves, the self of the family and that of the academy, Alisha portrays overlapping versions of the self: the speaker of "many Englishes" writes alternately as a young black woman, a new college student, a writer, a granddaughter, and an intellectually questing self in the process of "remaking her life." The "I" in Alisha's essay is not monological. . . . In the process of her writing, Alisha contends with complicated affective and social issues of translation . . .: how to be independent from teachers, yet also how to accept direction from them; how to switch codes according to context without being an opportunistic rhetor; how to enter one discourse world without losing the words and values of another. How, in short, to translate self and difference between language worlds without becoming "a stranger to yourself" (519).

From this standard, Alisha's narrative has exceeded the boundaries of Soliday's original definition of a successful literacy narrative that relied on the differential between

past and present selves. In fact crucial to her configuration of the critical dimension of Alisha's text is what Soliday sees as its dialogic, indeed polyvocal, nature. Soliday believes that in the construction of her text, "Alisha practices a sort of autoethnography" (519), citing Pratt's contact zone theory mentioned earlier in this chapter. Alisha's text enters into a dialogue with dominant discourses similar to the way Douglass's does, in this case, engaging and re-presenting herself into the different discourse communities she describes. One of the strengths of her literacy account, according to Soliday, is the way Alisha challenges the posited separatenesses of those different language worlds to consider that the boundaries "are not as stable as people usually think and may in fact result in hybridized speech" (517).

Alisha's narrative, written from her self-described subject position "as a double minority (a young black woman)" (518), occurred in response to a series of readings that brought to the forefront questions of language and culture acquisition and translation. These readings heightened what Soliday, following Richard Hoggart, calls "cultural friction points" (521). The status of "double-minority" in combination with the impetus of these "frictions," it would seem, enabled the writer to craft a text that is not merely a reinscription of uncritical developmental narratives of assimilation. Do these factors constitute a kind of crisis along the lines that Felman suggests is necessary for critical education to take place? Perhaps. (Of course there are other unknown, unaccounted for factors in the student's life that affect the composition of her story.) Or perhaps,

contrary to the "theory" of literacy acquisition that I read in Douglass's Narrative, the critical text is a much more "nurturable" phenomenon, one that can take place in an institutional setting under the guidance of critical pedagogues.

But another question to ask here is: how "critical" is the text the student has produced? While Soliday's assessment of the student's work is compelling, I think there is yet another tack to take, and this tack leads us back to the question I have momentarily tried to sidestep: the relation of the writer to the text. Although Soliday is careful in her phrasing to focus on the text, throughout her analysis there seems to be an implicit equation with Alisha the writer and the dialogic "I" Soliday sees as governing the piece: "When Alisha recognized the legitimacy of her own hybridization, she was then prepared to consider the difference between hybridizing and assimilating languages" (518). Not just a critical text has been constructed but a critical Alisha--which is certainly a very plausible outcome. But it is not inevitable. In Chapter One, I discussed the implications of viewing student personal writing as performance of what the student sees as an appropriate response to a rhetorical situation. I think such an approach is valid here. Alisha's text may very well be remarkable for the way it "reads" Soliday as teacher, offering a reflection of what the student has come to understand is valuable in the context of her writing class. When Soliday says that "Alisha relativizes the differences between dialects, which for her means accepting her double-voicedness as a strength rather than as a sign of her cultural disloyalty" (518), I can't

help but imagine that this is the conclusion Soliday prefers her student reach. And, likewise, I can't help but imagine that Alisha knows this, too.

For Alisha is a success story from Soliday's point of view because she reflects what Soliday believes is an empowering subject position to occupy in relation to language. (I mostly share Soliday's view, although I have some reservations about what she finds praiseworthy here. To my mind, the litany of negotiated positions that Soliday offers as evidence of hybridity smacks somewhat of the accommodation and reasonableness that Bloom connects with the middle class aesthetic of composition.) Of course it is not necessary to suppose that performance implies betrayal or that reading the professor correctly and assuming a critical stance are mutually exclusive. Perhaps such rhetorical positioning is another way to assume a critical stance that is perfectly compatible with composing theories of process: through imitation; through "trying on" a role in a text. While such an idea is very plausible, the issue remains a tension for me as I read literacy narratives and other student texts that begin to bring to the forefront ideological positions (see Chapter Four). In order to explore this tension further, I look now at some student work that was produced in my own classroom and that of a colleague's.<sup>1</sup>

In both of the following examples, students have produced texts that consider the students' educational experiences in relation to readings about education and intellectual activity. Although these examples are from two different classes, both teachers, Bob and myself, share a

"wish list" about what we hope to accomplish in our writing classes. We both include readings that we hope will provide a basis for interrogating educational practices, especially in relation to writing and language use, with the hope of engaging students in an active inquiry about these subjects. My question in considering these particular essays is to what extent do the students adopt a critical stance towards their educational experiences and the reading material? Where do they call into question dominant discourses about education, and can this "critical stance" be understood as a reflection of the classroom discourse?

In the first example, my student Roberto considers his history with school in light of reading about the banking concept of education and Elsassser's and Fiore's attempt to utilize Freire's ideas in their classroom in the Bahamas. For me what is important about Roberto's essay is the way it demonstrates the influence of competing discourses about education, hovering between a critique of traditional education and an endorsement of prevailing assumptions embedded in our cultural narrative of education and development. Roberto's essay follows:

*"Knowledge, a consequence of inspiration"*

*Big questions come to mind when I think about education. What would happen to us without knowledge, and I wonder, how the world would be if we did not have the ability to reason? To me, it's very hard to determine which is the best way to educate. I always thought it was hard, because everyone seems to understand things differently and people read and*

comprehend in different ways. For me, having an education is very crucial in regards to becoming and thereafter staying successful. To me, being successful means to have control of your life. And to get to that point knowledge is a must. In my personal educational experience, I have learned that the best way for me to learn is by being confronted with something that intrigues, challenges, and provokes thought in me. To others it might be different. Some may be better off with a simple direct explanation that in conclusion leads to the solving of a problem. Those I call "robots." While others learn from mistakes, or need different procedures or different angles of explanation so that comprehension can sink in, as the case in Oliver Sacks's Rebecca. I think that good education comes from good teaching. For me good teaching requires patience, devotion, charisma, experience, knowledge, but most of all, the acknowledgement of what is necessary for the student to learn. That's why I have resolved that there is no best way to educate; simply there is a lot of good ways to educate.

Paulo Freire, one of the most influential radical educators of the world, stated that for good knowledge to be obtained "educators should abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relation with the world." In part I agree with Freire, because this philosophy of his is the best way for me to learn.

This method engages an individual like myself, to think critically and thus leading for a quest for answers that only strong, self-motivated research could answer. This allows not just memorization of the text but understanding of it through

reasoning. It also presents an academic atmosphere that relates to the world around me, with a presence of academic freedom. In the other hand, I also disagree with him. Because even though the banking concept, to me, is like having a person in front of a computer typing information and the computer absorbing it (teacher to student) this concept might be helpful to others that of course are different from me.

Sometimes, educating takes more than finding ways to sink information into other individuals. Most important, it takes inspiring. I believe that when someone or something inspires an individual, it helps them realize what their vocation is. This helps an individual that has had a bad experience with learning to find out what is it that calls upon them, thus the zest of pursuing for knowledge no matter in witch way can submerge. I have many friends, who I think are very intelligent that have ended their high school or college education because they have not been able to find true meaning to the hard work that they've put through. For one, they blame society, my cousin Felix quotes, "all they want is for us to do what they have prepare for us to do. Why do I need an education? So that I can become what they think I can be and so that they can take half of pay check in taxes." Two, they call themselves stupid and imply that they are not smart enough to learn just because they have failed to master a subject and or problem whether at school or in everyday society. Three, they blame teachers, suggesting that they cannot teach or society for being tough on them. I can keep going on with excuses about why many young people have discontinued their education, but the point that I am trying to make is that inspiration could have changed these young

people's minds and thus not letting extraordinary intelligence go to waste. You never know, maybe if my cousin Felix would have continued his education, he could have been the founder to the cure to AIDS, or the inventor of a car engine that would just run on water, or the first man on mars. You just never know.

In Oliver Sacks's *Rebecca*, the teacher's faith and devotion, I believe, allowed him to discover amazing qualities in Rebecca. What a remarkable event I might say. But that's not all. With his inspiration and devotion to Rebecca as a teacher and a friend, he helped Rebecca to develop these amazing qualities. I believe that there are many kids like Rebecca, that even though they are not in the same mental state as she was, desperately need guidance, support, and faith from their teachers. (Parents, educators, society).

When I was in high school I was fortunate to attend a high school that gave these things and even more. I attended St. Benedict's preparatory high school. This is a private non-profit organization located in Newark, New Jersey. There I just did not learn about the three "R," I learned how society works. There, I was put to the test. They test my ability to reason. Everyone worked together so that everyone understood class material. I remember Mr. Curpus my English teacher and how he used to sit down with me and the rest of my classmate, and one by one explain to us thing that we did not understand. Also they showed me many things that are valuable to my present learning. When I played sports they challenged me, not just physically, but mentally as well. They gave me hope. They helped me believe in me and in

others. But most important, the relationship between them and I was that of true friends. Freire also stated that " teachers efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization;also must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power;must be partners of the student in their relation with them." I think that this was exactly what I experience in my time there. This made me feel as though I had something in common with my teachers and helped me to be more outspoken. To me this is the way good learning occurs. Sometimes I ask myself, why aren't all schools like this? Why aren't all teachers like those I had in St. Benedicts? Why doesn't society do anything about it?

My high school experience did not end there. Due to financial reasons, during the beginning of my junior year in high school, I transferred to a vocational technical high school. When I started to attend classes, I sort of felt weird and uneasy about the learning atmosphere that was presented. Most students did not care about class discussion or topic. It felt as though only 40% of the learning period was used for working on the class material. While the other 60% of the time was spent on conversing, about manner different from class material. On one side, there was the teacher, who, even though he tried to engage in tough teaching as I call it, was not perseverant, interested, or engaged enough to maintain the class's attention and immediately gave up. And on the other, the student, who just gave up because class was either boring, too hard, or just because they did not feel as though they were learning something important.

It seems as though no one care. And those students who were interested in learning were kept from it. Now that I have graduated, my friend Erica tells me that things have become worse. She tells me that school has become a place not of education but of chilling. Students do whatever they want, not concerning learning of course. And most of the teachers don't even want to be there!!! When this tragic and devastating event occurs, learning the most important thing, is left aside. Erica confessed to me that her classmate and her were very upset with their geometry teacher because he failed the entire class. She told me that she would off been fine with it if it was true, that she fell. But she said, "he did not teach at all." And when it came time for tests, everyone flunked. After going to the vise principal about the issue, he turned his back to her and told her that he could not do anything about the grades but he would sit down with the geometry teacher and discuss what was going on. This problem was never resolved, as it should have been resolved. First Erica and 90% of the class failed the class and had to attend summer school, the teacher wasn't even spoken to by the vise-principal, just because the vise-principal, as I suspect, did not want to face a little problem. And most disturbing of all, the teacher remain working at the school.

When she told me this story, I was very angry at the vise-principal because he failed to acknowledge a very important problem. I was disturbed with the teacher for not caring. And confused because I could not understand why they did not understand the importance of knowledge. I think that if this weak, unfair, and devastating atmosphere of learning continues, there will be many dramatic consequences that

society will confront in the future. Why? Because due to educators, ' weather it is parents, teachers or even society, lack of devotion towards educating well, our future society wont be able to manage critical problems.

I feel that modern day society has lost the true meaning and value of knowledge. Society has forgotten its significance, why is the main reason why we should be knowledgeable, and what is the best way to get there. I think that knowledge is the #1 element that contributes to not perfect but desired living and existence. With it, we are able to understand ourselves, and our differences from others. Also, we understand others, the communion of society and how we contribute to it. But most important, how society affects us. I believe that we should be knowledgeable, because if we are, we could live better for us and for the co-existence with others. I know that nobody knows the answers to everything but the more knowledge the better.

It's really hard, I must admit, to obtain knowledge. Until I got to St. benedict's, it seems, I could not find true meaning to education. And going to St. Benedict's, I believe, is responsible for my uncontrollable zest for wanting to lean. Now it is not as hard as before. What used to be an " I don't want to go to school," has turn to a " I want to go to school." What used to be an " I don't want to do homework because I don't want to read," has turned to an "I want to do homework because I want to read." This was all possible because once I got to St. Benedict's, the good teaching helped me find out who I really was and who I wanted to be. Sometimes I wonder how my life would be if this experience had occurred earlier in my life. Whether or not I

would be better off now.

What really bothers me the most about modern day educational societies is that they're not what they should be. Now days, I believe, the majority of educators are not sincere enough with their selection of profession. I believe that if an individual chooses to become a teacher they should understand that teaching is more than going to a classroom and translate information to a bunch of students. Teaching is an art that requires much practice and devotion, and should be treated with more respect. This means that when teaching, that particular individual should do his or her best while teaching. Being a teacher is like being a second parent, and special friend, someone that could be depended on as a role model to others. But at this moment, that does not seem to be the case.

In my life, I have learned many things. One of the most important is the significance of knowledge and its power. This has made me think critically about education and the way it is from the way I think it should be. Maybe it's just that I am too demanding. But I expected individual knowledge to be more sophisticated and absolutely diverse. And it's true like one of my best friends Lisaldi said "that a person who eats an apple when they're hungry, will enjoy it and digested better than when they are not". But maybe I think, that hunger could be triggered by someone else's inspiration and thus leaving a pleasing scratch in an individual's memory never to be forgotten. Role models create inspiration, inspiration creates great minds, great minds create a better more desirable world, and a desirable world is priceless.

During one of the class discussions on Freire, Roberto made the observation, "Wait a minute. I just realized something. This is how you teach." I acknowledged that my ideas about education have been influenced by Freire, among others. This moment seemed to be a provocative one for Roberto. During this same class, he explained the metaphor he was trying to develop about what he thinks is the best way to learn. He alludes to it in this draft, when he mentions the "pleasing scratch" in his last paragraph. I note it here because the way he explained the idea in class is somewhat different from the way he wrote about it. In class he said that I the teacher was exposing him to new ideas, the effect of which was like a scratching in his brain that would not go away and that he would have to return to again and again in order to contemplate its significance. To my mind this seems quite different from the description of "inspiration" that he offers in his written version of the idea.

I am struck by the way this trope became "translated" into his text because I think the difference between his written and oral version points to the conflicting discourses that compete in Roberto's educational narrative. When he spoke about his idea in class, I understood him to be describing a process of inquiry that proceeded from doubt. Furthermore, the "scratching" seemed to refer to an arresting event or idea that puts learners into Felman's crisis position of reevaluation, where they must rethink their relationship to received knowledge. But Roberto's attempts to interrogate the banking concept in his essay are continually on the brink of being absorbed by liberal discourses surrounding education and development, which I

find evident in the way the critical reflection he described in class gets, in the written version, chalked up to the old standby of teacher inspiration.

Roberto is from the Dominican Republic, and he does experience some difficulty in expressing his ideas in English. He is often in conference with other Latinos in the class, trying out and seeking input on his translations. But I think the reduction of his metaphor to "inspiration" reflects more than ESL difficulties, at least more than the difficulties of translating from Spanish to English. In my reading, part of the struggle of Roberto's piece is to express ideas more radical than the liberal discourse to which he has been exposed will allow him to form. As Knoblauch and Brannon might remark, Roberto is in the position of having to put new wine in old skins as he tries to accommodate to dominant narratives the burgeoning reconception of his experience as a learner. From the opening paragraph, the difficulty is evident. Even as he refers to learning by rote as robotic, he finishes with a description straight out of liberal discourse of the teacher as hero, one possessed of the stereotypical qualities of "patience, devotion, charisma." In his attempts to explain his positive experiences at St. Benedict's, Roberto begins to locate his narrative in terms of Freire's dialogic conceptions of knowledge. But ultimately the point collapses into the category of "friendship," another feature associated with the heroic pedagogue offering gifts of learning. Instead of being able to sustain a critique of methodology, Roberto's analysis ends up referencing the sentimentality of the caring teacher, which is evident in his discussion of the

bad geometry class. As I pointed out to Roberto, the difficulty that the class experienced isn't necessarily a reflection of the teacher's degree of caring (in fact if he didn't "care," he might simply just have passed everybody).

And yet as I paint this mixed picture of success of Roberto's attempts to create a critical text, it occurs to me that another reading here is possible. Is Roberto in fact being a critical reader, resisting the authority of the new texts he is encountering? When he writes about the friendship with teachers that he experienced in high school, is he using the ideas of Freire to augment his own understanding, borrowing concepts from Freirean theory without surrendering to them? Rather than a failed attempt to appropriate critical discourse, Roberto's writing may be indicative of a successful attempt of mediation; an entering into a dialogue between his experiences and Freire's philosophy. Rather than endorse the new ideas he is encountering, Roberto guardedly admits their validity while maintaining a skeptical stance. Thus he is able to consider their value while at the same time maintaining that there may be other ways of learning equally valid for learners with different styles.

Or does this mediation represent a retreat from a critical position, an attempt to have all things all ways for all people, a stage of extreme relativism that Perry catalogued as a typical stage in the college experience? Does Roberto's narrative shy away from asking the tough questions about knowledge, power and success that he broaches, relying instead in the end on a hybridized developmental narrative of UNCF's the-mind-is-a-terrible-

thing-to-waste and Master Card's "priceless" advertising campaign? Like the student essays in Bishop's book, Roberto's piece grafts onto the existing cultural narrative with which he is familiar. To what extent does this discourse interfere with his critical formulations? I also consider that Roberto is enacting what he understands to be a privileged discourse in his writing class. Having ascertained that his teacher is influenced by Freire, should he not endeavor to pay tribute to those ideas?

This last question, about the way students read their classes and teachers, is one that comes to mind when I consider the next example of educational narrative that comes from Bob's class. The following is an excerpt from a paper written by Bob's student Louissa.

*Is Intellectual Activity Really Beneficial?*

*This is Prison?*

*Twelve long years going onto thirteen, inside this place, this repulsive place where you are trained to follow everything you learn there throughout your life. A certain way to think, a way to do this and that, you are a product of this place. Basically there is nothing you can do about it. Specifically because everyone is in favor of attending here, no isolated soul questions this horrible places' doings. Everything is believed and fed to you as if you were a pet. You are programmed to obey and follow, not even knowing why, not knowing the benefits, just conforming. I didn't know all this; I was just informed. I was just told after all of my*

hard years of education, it meant nothing. Well, at least that's how I got it and I'm taking it.

A question that was never brought to my attention before is now the most puzzling aspect of my school life. Well, it's not quite a question; it's more of an uncertainty. It is whether or not to just accept intellectual activity as easily as it was introduced to me. Should I accept it as easily as I accepted mainstream education? Now there is a big difference though. Now I am not a child, I am not solely dependent of my mother's decisions. If my mother accepted it, why should I bother? If she didn't look into the possibility of my being taught more thinking why should I? Now I can look at this possibility for myself. Ever since this course first started I have been having doubts and not just skepticism. Not this cynical voice in my head saying this is "bull." It is more of annoying "what ifs" and "how comes" and "whys." They were and are real suspicions that boggle my mind as we went through endless class discussions. Is intellectual activity really beneficial? Let's look at the evidence.

I can remember how easily mainstream education was spoon fed to me. This has been this way for years, and now we are just realizing that it's all not for the better. Starting the kindergarten and memorizing the alphabet and how to recognize colors. I can't help but to wonder how else can one instill this into a child's mind. Now we are just throwing it all away and introducing something different. Will people in the future do the same? I ponder whether some knew about these problems that the education system has or did everyone just have this "mass emotion" that this

education was the only way. I think so. I also wonder if there even is a problem? Does education even have something that needs to be fixed? Maybe we just needed something to change or analyze or blame for a lack of fulfillment in our writing?

I relate to Doris Lessing when she questions how the people in the future will look back on us. But I'm not talking of savage ways; I'm talking about education taught in the wrong manner. Will people of the future look at our "new" education system and question it as we do previous education? Will they laugh and criticize an intellectually active society? Will they come up with something better as we think we are doing? Isn't it true that when the mainstream education was introduced we thought this would be the best system? This holds truth to it. This was the mass emotion; when this education was introduced. As mentioned in Lessing's piece "When in the Future They Look Back on Us" there is this "mass emotion" where we all think everything we endure in is wise and no one chooses to break away, everyone accepted, just as we are doing this intellectual thinking. But there are some, I for one, am having doubts just as those who chose to break free of "submissive" education, those which consists of writers such as: bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldua who didn't accept their education and wrote about it. I don't accept this critical manner and am forced to write about it. Forced because all of my other inquiries weren't as strong as my doubts on intellectual activity.

My question is if these authors didn't agree with their education, must they come up with an alternate solution? Can't they just not agree with their past education, plain

and simple. But I think that is not how they want things. They being the philosophers and scholars who love this way of thinking. What about the rest? The teenagers who love the straight-to-the point teaching and the teachers who love to teach it? Ms. Anzaldua and hooks probably would say that they are still "trapped" in "submissive" education circle, but I argue against.

Throughout their pieces they pass judgment on their so called "submissive" education and I can't help but to wonder why we are now not judging this new education that is the total opposite of what we were taught in early years? Why are we just doing away with the old just because some say it was wrong? Why are we not using our "submissive" education to question our new found "intellectual" education?

Imagine this, what will it be like if little children were indulged critical thinkers, or if everyone went around questioning the government, or just things wrong in society, etc. It would just be a world full of complications. I mean I love the advocates who stick up for this and that but we don't need a place full of them. Or do we? I don't know, will questioning have us regulating the government? Is having no power or say in it better? Some people just like things the way they are and it's not that they are afraid of change or are just so narrow minded they're not open to possibilities. I feel almost a little of this way. I feel that if top educators made it this far, what was the problem with their education. Is it that some just use this as an excuse because they feel their writing is held back due to this? I'm really caught in the middle.

Bob is interested in introducing students to the idea of cultural criticism, and his readings reflect this. He is also interested in fostering writing that is what he terms in his syllabus, "intellectually engaged." Such writing for Bob is based on questioning and indeterminacy; what he describes as "writing from uncertainty." His position is extensively elaborated in his syllabus of several pages in length:

*What is there to think about if everything we do is simply about getting the single correct answer which some expert already knows? Where is the thinking in that? Where is the generative activity of mind? . . . In this [alternative] universe [of writing that he is proposing] there are real, unanswered questions. A great deal is uncertain.*

Louissa's text exemplifies the aesthetic of uncertainty which Bob's syllabus claims he values. Clearly Louissa's work, peppered with tentativeness and reversal, is a reflection of this discourse. That fact in and of itself does not discredit the rhetorical stance of Louissa's "I," which, similar to the "I" of the student narrative which Soliday describes, is not monologic. Louissa's "I" is in dialogue with itself as well as the readings referenced in the essay. In the course of this dialogue, her essay demonstrates resistance to the ideas she is encountering precisely through the rhetorical position of uncertainty that Bob has attempted to inculcate in his class. As a result, the student succeeds in creating a text that positions her "I" critically within the essay, assuming an active, "intellectually engaged" role in relation to her educational experience that defies unproblematic assimilation.

Bob's course also contained a service learning component that involved tutoring elementary school students two hours a week in after care programs. Bob is of the opinion that this requirement has a positive effect on student writing although he is unsure exactly in what way. We speculated that the beneficial effect might come from the chance to occupy a different subject position in relation to an educational experience. Being a tutor "makes strange," as Soliday puts it, the experience of education and creates the opportunity for a double-consciousness that affords critical insight. Louissa refers to her tutoring at a later place in her essay, using it as a means to interrogate the question of whether or not children can be taught critical thinking. She finds dissonance between her experience with young children and the radical ideas about education that she is reading about. The discrepancy seems to function as an epistemological "crisis" for Louissa, allowing her to question the different cultural narratives of education that she is encountering. Likewise Louissa chronicles a similar crisis moment in the first paragraph of her piece, induced by the readings and Bob's ideological position. She experiences the ideas he is bringing to the class as an invalidation of her entire educational career: *I was just told after all of my hard years of education, it meant nothing. Well, at least that's how I got it and I'm taking it.*

Louissa's rhetorical performance certainly reflects her reading of Bob's desire to have his students pursue a narrative of inquiry. Indeed from that perspective the acrobatic reading that she has performed is quite impressive in its negotiation. If we understand her essay as a series

of moves designed to satisfy Bob's "submerged agenda," her paper takes on an even greater complexity than a first glance might reveal. Bob has presented her with material by authors whom he obviously admires; thinks are worthwhile. But Louissa is cagey enough to understand that a simple embracing of these texts will not satisfy Bob's desire for inquiry. She must express doubt, but she realizes that even though doubt is good in this writing context, it must be a kind of respectful doubt, carefully modulated not to give offense. Hence the pains Louissa takes to assure that her polite skepticism is not cynicism: *Ever since this course first started I have been having doubts and not just skepticism. Not this cynical voice in my head saying this is "bull." It is more of annoying "what ifs" and "how comes" and "whys."*

And while Louissa demonstrates a great deal of rhetorical skill in performing this negotiation, her text can still be read as resistant, not wholly submerged by this (presumably) new aesthetic she is encountering, a resistance that becomes apparent when her text is read for its affective dimension. For there is a sense of anger suffused throughout the essay, one that stems from the narrator's sense of being a pawn in the education game of which Bob's class is yet another incarnation. *Everything is believed and fed to you as if you were a pet. You are programmed to obey and follow, not even knowing why, not knowing the benefits, just conforming. I didn't know all this; I was just informed. I was just told after all of my hard years of education, it meant nothing.* While Louissa's "not monologic" I is willing to adopt the stance of inquiry expected of her to do well in Bob's class, this same "I" has found a way to let the reader

know she is not happy that the rules have been changed and that she experiences a sense of powerlessness as a result of the change. From this stand point, Louissa has constructed a self for this essay that achieves a transcultured agency in an autoethnographic text, for she has found a way to represent herself; to speak back to Bob's discourse using the idiom he has given her.

In this chapter I have discussed how the popularity of literacy and educational narratives in the college writing class reflects writing teachers' interest in the progress of their students and their students' texts. The appeal of such narratives relies at least to a certain extent on the perhaps tacit assumption that the narrated self accurately represents the student's self, indeed that they are one in the same, and that student "progress" can be measured through student writing. The text interests us because we believe it serves as a kind of barometer of the student, although it may be more like a shadow on the wall of Plato's cave. The student literacy narrative as a crafted piece of cultural criticism, that is, as text, has little significance because often no one besides the teacher is likely ever to read it. The question of audience and the conflation of text and life are two intersecting issues that I will continue to discuss in Chapter Three. In this next chapter, I turn to the treatment of subjectivity as it applies to what is known as "writing to heal" and the potential of this genre of first-person writing to produce cultural criticism and cultural critics.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The first student work that I refer to was produced in a basic writing class at a state college in New Jersey, which I taught. The next piece was produced in the classroom of a colleague whose classes I was observing. His course was a freshman composition class taught at the same school.

Chapter 3  
Confessional Healing? The Rhetoric of the Therapeutic  
Narrative

"This is emotional hodgepodge--not a story," he said.  
"A story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end.

"But this is my life. . . . I thought by writing out  
what I don't know and can't understand, it would stop  
hurting me."

Anzia Yeziarska  
Red Ribbon on a White Horse (78)

"Because in the end forgetfulness has too high a price,  
that is why I write this, because I cannot write anything  
else." So begins an essay I wrote while my mother was in the  
process of dying from breast cancer, an essay I finished  
after her death, and one which continues to provoke questions  
for me about the healing function of writing. The opening  
sentence with its agrammatical symmetry suggests multiple  
functions and motivations for composing. Certainly there is  
an idea of catharsis contained there but also a desire to  
make permanent and present that which is fleeting--not to  
mention a sense of the imperative. It is especially this  
last part that has kept my attention over the years. What  
did I mean, "because I cannot write anything else"?

I am drawn to the idea of writing and healing despite  
myself. I am frankly skeptical about the kind of  
subjectivity such narratives produce, about their level of  
social engagement, their indebtedness to psychotherapeutic  
discourse. What does the word healing mean in this context?  
That question is behind much of my inquiry. When we say  
writing heals, what exactly are we saying it is doing?

A friend has told me about Gilda's Club, a place of

support for people with cancer, founded in honor of the late Gilda Radner. I've written a letter to the director explaining my interest in writing and healing and asking if there are any writing workshops that I can observe. For some reason, I expect to be turned down flat. To me there seems to be something predatory in my request, wanting to observe people who are trying to hold their lives together. Instead of refusal, I receive this email:

*Greetings from Gilda' Club. Joel Sesser forwarded your letter to me. I am one of the program staff members here who creates the calendar of our activities. Thank you for your interest in our program. We do have writing workshops available to our members who are people living with cancer, their families and friends. The writing workshops do not necessarily focus on cancer, some do, some do not. We have qualified volunteers who present the workshops. Some of the workshops are monthly, every other week, or at any time that the volunteers can give to us. If you are interested in further talking to us about it, I would suggest a meeting with us where you can see the Club, and we can discuss the possibility of your teaching here. Feel free to contact me at: 212-647-9700, ext. 252 to schedule a meeting.*

*Sincerely,*

*Catherine Vlasto, CSW*

*Program Manager for membership*

How on earth did she ever get the idea that I wanted to teach a class, I wonder? It never occurred to me. Nonetheless, I

call to set up the appointment. What will we talk about? The night before I am to meet with Catherine, while taking a walk (this is when I often get ideas), I realize what I want to do. I want to organize a workshop around writing the story of what it is like to lose a loved one to cancer. I would focus on telling the story, (or a story, I correct myself) rather than on the healing. It would be about telling a story that the writer imagined was important for others to hear. I realize now that that is how I thought about the narrative of my mother's death. For some reason, this is a eureka moment for me, although once it is said, it seems like a modest and obvious enough claim. (I try to explain my idea to friends--they don't get it. They say, yes, writing the story will be cathartic, people will be able to sort out their feelings--No, it's different, I try to explain. I sit with a friend at dinner [such a middle class image]. "It's a kind of cultural work," I say to him, over the primavera, "to tell the story of cancer." "Hmm," he says. "Well, that's, uh, profound, I guess?")

I think how this reception, which exasperates me, helps me understand my suspicions about writing and healing, that in teaching this workshop, I'll be acting as some kind of New Age Mother Theresa . . .

In this chapter, I continue to struggle with my ambivalence. I begin by describing my understanding of some of the scholarship on writing and healing; the theoretical possibilities and difficulties it presents for me and how some of these hopes and snarls inform my understanding of my experience with members of Gilda's Club. I start with an overview of the scholarship and where it stands in relation

to composition theory and practices, echoing some of the critiques and concerns analyzed in Chapter One. I then describe my experience working at Gilda's Club. My conclusions about this experience are tentative; my inquiry ongoing about what this experience has to teach me about writing, especially writing within the jurisdiction of the university. For I am especially interested in thinking about the application of writing to heal in the college curriculum and where such writing fits into discourses about subjectivity and development. Once we "uncouple composition and schooling" (Gere 80), what new directions, if any, does this kind of work, done outside the academy, point us to within it? Being at Gilda's Club provided a context where I as the instructor was momentarily free from the concerns about privacy that can dog discussions of personal narrative in the composition class. How does this different context change the composing processes and reception of first-person narrative; the dynamics of a writing group with respect to authority and agency? How applicable are post-structural critiques of subjectivity under these circumstances? How different is the work I do here from the work I do as a college instructor?

### The Composition of Healing

As I discussed in Chapter One, the first-person narrative in the writing classroom raises red flags because of its potential to disrupt culturally accepted boundaries of public and private, a concern often shared by right-wing ideologues and liberal college professors alike. Furthermore, the colonization of the private/personal sphere

by therapeutic discourse, and the paradoxical reverence and distrust with which the latter is often regarded, engender further suspicion about the appropriateness of personal narrative as public writing; whether it yields what counts as legitimate knowledge and whether writing teachers are competent to oversee its production. The success of the rhetoric of therapy has in part been enabled by the modern emphasis on the personal, and both discourses have provoked post-structural critiques relevant to first-person writing performances of the public personal. These critiques emanate in part from the suspicion that such writing is allied with the confession and what Foucault identified as the deeply hegemonic nature of that genre: "Since the Middle Ages at least, Western Societies have established the confession as one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth (58). . . . We have (since) become a singularly confessing society" (59). Foucault further provides ammunition for would-be detractors of romantic, expressivist pedagogy by noting that "The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, 'demands' only to surface" (60) and that

The confession . . . has been employed in a whole series of relationships: children and parents, students and educators, patients and psychiatrists, delinquents and experts. The motivations and effects it is expected to produce have varied, as have the forms it has taken: interrogations,

consultations, autobiographical narratives,  
letters. (63)

This insight into the potentially constraining and normative effect of autobiography helps set the stage for critiques of the classroom personal narrative. As noted in Chapter One, rhetoricians such as Berlin and Faigley identify the genre as a depoliticizing instrument that, by default, compels and rewards a particular middle class subjectivity.

Despite, or because of, such critiques, proponents of personal writing can still defend their pedagogy by shifting from an expressivist justification to a social constructionist one: students can use personal narrative as a strategy of discourse intervention; as a means of rewriting the narratives which have interpellated them (see, for example, Soliday). This idea is derived from or at least in keeping with post-structural feminist scholarship regarding subjectivity and autobiographical genres. For example, Suzette A. Henke, in her study of twentieth century women's narratives, finds that

As a genre, life-writing encourages the author/narrator to reassess the past and to reinterpret the intertextual codes inscribed on personal consciousness by society and culture. Because the author can instantiate the alienated or marginal self into the pliable body of a protean text, the newly revised subject, emerging as the semifictive protagonist of an enabling counternarrative, is free to rebel against the values and practices of a dominant culture and to assume an empowered position of political agency in

the world. (xv-xvi)

Thus such writing, in this view, effectively functions as the equivalent of a therapeutic holding space, a zone in which the writer uses text to understand an existing socially-inflected subjectivity and eventually to assert a more empowered, perhaps counterhegemonic one.

This is the rationale that underlies much of the current interest in the relationship between writing and healing,<sup>1</sup> especially as such practices and philosophies might have application in the college curriculum. Proponents of writing to heal have identified a parallelism between writing and therapeutic processes, noting that the cognition involved in producing language narratives is similar to that which occurs when trauma victims seek integration, that is to say healing, of the traumatic experience. Trauma studies, such as the work of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, have been very influential in articulating the sociological and physiological dimensions of trauma, and Marian MacCurdy ("Trauma") and Alice Brand emphasize the way trauma images are stored in a part of the brain that does not encompass language function. This work has helped provide a basis for legitimizing intuitive claims about the efficacy and legitimacy of writing and healing. While practitioners of writing to heal share many of the same concerns reviewed in Chapter One regarding privacy violation and the dangers of unsupervised therapy, especially in the context of a college curriculum, the very nature of this endeavor presupposes a valuation and endorsement of what is often considered personal writing.

Yet this valuation often takes into account post-

structural critiques of personal writing that stem from a contemporary understanding of the nature of subjectivity in textual representation as contingent, partial, performative, above all, constructed. Indeed, the connection between the writing and the healing processes is often articulated in terms of the provisional and constructed dynamics of textuality and discourse. For example, in the introduction to their collection Writing and Healing, Charles Anderson and Marian MacCurdy write that as the healing process seeks "to integrate both the self and its representation into a larger community of understanding" (6), the writing process provides an ideal means through which this can occur: "Through the dual possibilities of permanence and revision, the chief healing effect of writing is thus to recover and to exert a measure of control over that which we can never control--the past" (7). Specifically, Anderson claims that writing can create "contra-contextual space" ("Suture" 66) in which the writer is able to examine and confront the dominant discourses that have produced the current subjectivity of the writer as represented in the text. He further asserts that it is through "retrospective composition and revision" ("Suture" 77) that the life experience recorded in writing comes to have its healing significance for the writer. Likewise, Louise DeSalvo, addressing a general readership in Writing as a Way of Healing, stresses that

A healing narrative doesn't just narrate what happened to us and how we feel. It is a way for us to reflect upon the significance of what happened. It connects our experience to other experiences in our lives or to those of other people or to

society. It reflects upon cause and effect, illuminating why events may have happened as they did. (60)

The rationales contain an interesting paradox: writing is a means of connection, of locating one's experience within a larger narrative and thus it is healing. But it is also healing because it allows a disconnection, a distancing that permits the writer to analyze and work through the implications of any given experience by morphing that experience into text. As such, it would seem that the healing function of writing is connected to the negotiation of public and private that takes place in the creation of the non-fiction narrative.

Advocates of writing and healing, especially those who are working within an academic environment, are sensitive to charges that such writing is solipsistic and lacking in social engagement and thus take pains to preempt such criticism by asserting its social and political dimension. Similarly, they are anxious to assure would-be critics of their understanding of the nature of textual subjectivity and representation in such writing and to observe the critical distinction implied between the terms "subject" and "self." That is to say that the first-person narratives of healing are performances of a constructed "I" and not unmediated outpourings of an originating self. Indeed it is precisely in the constructed nature of such texts that change and thus healing is possible. Glibly put, the potential exists for writers to write themselves out of one discourse into another. However, despite these post-structural narrative insights, I think many writing-to-heal rationales ultimately

fall back on a position of conflating text and life; the writer's representation with the writer's self. I suspect that this must occur in many cases, if autobiographical narrative is to have the salubrious possibilities attributed to it. In the writing, a movement from deconstructed representation to unified self must take place. The healing narrative ultimately produces a "coherent subject of utterance evinced through the process of narrative disclosure" (Henke xv), and the paradigm for such writing follows the romantic prescription of allying art with the discovery and articulation of truth. As such, the authors of healing life narratives seek to replace a false, externally imposed representation of their experience with one that is true, internally-generated by insight. It is in such a shift that the self attains agency and thus healing.

I will return to the above idea and some of its positive implications shortly. For now I want to review the difficulties that might accompany the equation of text and life and thus hint at the limitations of deploying writing to heal as a strategy in the writing class. To do so, I invoke a specific example from Mark Bracher's The Writing Cure, where a writing-to-heal perspective results in what I would call a misreading of a student text. In his book, Bracher lays out a foundation for what he calls a psychoanalytic writing pedagogy that is largely Lacanian in perspective and justification. Bracher's response to the therapy controversy is that writing teachers are embroiled in the contested arenas of privacy and therapeutic discourse whether they like it or not, so that it behooves them to have a better understanding of psychoanalytic theory, specifically as it

has applications to textual revision. Bracher cites a study by Chris Anson that investigated teacher response to student texts. The study involved collecting student writing samples from a summer immersion program to be shown to a group of writing teachers for their commentary. Bracher selects one essay and response in particular, a piece written by a student called "Bobby" and responded to a by "Mr. Jones," in order to make his point about how psychoanalytic theory can help teachers respond to student texts:

My Mother was gone out of town with her boyfriend and she left her car at home. When she was getting read to leave she said Don't take my car out of town keep it close to the house.

That Night I wanted to drive the car but my older brother said he would tell if I went far. He knew that my girlfriend live about ten Miles way from the town I lived in.

So i wonder if I should take the car and go later that night he said I could go so i went knowing I was not suppose to go. On the way back home I got stop by the police because the plates on the car had ran out. so the Decision I made was wrong and I learned to listent to what someone tell me to do with their stuff. (154)

In Anson's article, the accompanying teacher end comment to this student's draft is truly appalling. "Mr. Jones," as he is identified, lambastes the student for his inadequate writing skills and suggests that his lack of familiarity with English grammar is producing a cognitive deficiency that prevents the student from saying anything interesting about

the topic. As an antidote to such mean-spirited, inexcusable current traditionalism, Bracher has this to say:

A psychoanalytic teacher would thus respond not to the problems with grammar, punctuation, and so on, but rather to the desire Bobby expresses in this paper to free himself from the Other's (the mother's and brother's) demands and the conflict that this desire involves. The psychoanalytic teacher, in written comments or, even better, in conference, would ask Bobby to elaborate on both of these conflicting desires . . . , encouraging Bobby to provide more details about his relationship and feelings toward his mother, brother, and girlfriend, and perhaps toward his mother's boyfriend and the police as well. (155-6)

Well. Certainly this sort of probing is Phyllis Schlafly's nightmare come true, and Bracher's response sounds like the sort of ammunition that citizens armed themselves with during the Hatch Amendment hearings. I'm willing to grant that Bracher's suggestions are an improvement against what the callous Mr. Jones offered up, and, in general, I am of course in agreement with Bracher's overall strategy, which, as I see it, psychoanalytic frame aside, is one of eliciting further elaboration through content-based questions. Unlike the nasty Mr. Jones, Bracher takes the student's text seriously.

But perhaps that is just the problem here. In this case, Bracher may be taking the text too seriously as a piece of life writing<sup>2</sup> without admitting other generic possibilities. Bracher admits in the beginning of his book that he does not teach freshman writing and that this is not

his field of study. While this fact does not invalidate his arguments per se, I find in this instance that his lack of familiarity with the classroom shows, because I think it is quite likely that Bracher has misidentified the tale type here. Unfortunately, one of the limitations of Anson's otherwise very useful study is the decontextualization of the student essays that occurs in creating his comparative sample. We don't know what the student's attitude is towards this piece of writing; the assignment--to write about a moment when you had to make an important decision--was designed by Anson to fit the parameters of his study and was introduced into the immersion program in order to solicit the sample. Bracher, in his analysis, assumes a level of investment in the writing by the author that may not be there--or it may be of a different nature. While it is possible that the student was attempting to write about a life event and relationships that hold great significance for him, it is equally possible that the student was looking for a way to understand and fulfill an assignment in the best way he knew how by utilizing a genre he was familiar with and which he, perhaps mistakenly, thought would function effectively for the adult audience he was trying to engage. Robert Connors identifies this category of essay as the "I-learned-a-lesson" type (see Chapter Four) that is commonly used among freshman writers. The tell-tale sign is in the student's ending where he indicates that he made the wrong decision and that he learned to listen. Rather than see this essay as a primitive stab at understanding familial relationships, we could just as easily read it as the student's attempt to perform the familiar morality tale. I'm

not insisting these two motivations are mutually exclusive, but the limit of Bracher's psychoanalytic approach is its failure to take into account the rhetorical situation under which the composing took place.

Bracher's book is not concerned overtly with writing-to-heal, but the strategy he suggests for dealing with this student text closely resembles the strategies advocated for producing healing narratives. Fill in the gaps in the text, urges Charles Anderson ("Healing CCCC"), which echoes Louise DeSalvo's advice: ". . . to be healing, our stories must be conveyed so completely on paper that there are no gaps in the narrative" (61). Bracher's probing is designed to do just such filling. But the distinction here between the writer filling in the gaps in the text and filling in the gaps in the writer's life seems specious. If Bracher's intervention were to prove successful, its efficacy would derive not from the student understanding his essay as a malleable text that could be rewritten but on a ferreting out of his "true" feelings about his relationship to the various people named in the essay. The distinction between narrative and life--the distinction that critics of texts uphold--fades, as I think it must, as the writer collapses the distance between herself and her writing in order to attain the sense of investment necessary to effect a healing narrative. In effect the writer conflates his text with his life in order to gain mastery over unprobed or disabling narratives. As Henke puts it, regardless of their intellectual understanding of the fiction of the stable subject, "most contemporary autobiographers are engaged in fashioning coherent narratives of their own lives" (xv). This process may be an endemic

tendency of life writing itself, analogous to the way the subject in language cannot help but be immersed in belief as it articulates. Gregory Clark, explaining Richard's Weaver's theorizations on argument and rhetoric, discusses the way distance between arguer and argument collapse. We cannot expect any given rhetor to maintain a consciousness of his beliefs as rhetoric, and therefore we must rely on dialogue to keep argument ethical:

Implicitly or explicitly, writers write for the purpose of inducing others to adopt their beliefs. And because we cannot not fully believe what it is we believe, nor, when we express those beliefs, not try to persuade others to accept them, that purpose is unavoidable. . . . Our private purpose when we write is not to provide grist for the mill of public deliberation, but to persuade others to believe what we believe.(50)

In the case of writing to heal the self, that "other," the audience, must always include the writer.

While writing teachers may be aware of the contingent nature of narratives and may profitably use this understanding to push students in rewarding and healing directions, I'm not sure if the students gain this same perspective from their endeavors, nor am I sure that it is necessary that they do. An example of what I mean here can be found in Jacqueline Rinaldi's work with MS diagnosees. Rinaldi describes her attempts using therapeutic rhetoric to help participants in her workshop reconstruct their identities "in a way that makes failure (of their bodies) tolerable, even beneficial according to a different set of

values" (822). Rinaldi works from the assumption that "most of us rely on rhetoric to mitigate feelings of inadequacy and to revise the meaning of our lives accordingly" (823). Through the process of narrative revision, Rinaldi hopes that participants can revise their outlook of their disease and their relationship to it: "writers can awaken from the unexamined fictions that trap them in demeaning versions of self and convert such attitudes into salutary responses to illness" (825).

This is the theoretical perspective from which Rinaldi approaches her workshop. The participants' view is somewhat different, as evidenced by their concern "that most literature they had read about MS was written by people without experience of the disease" and their desire to "write their stories from a perspective that would, in their words, 'tell it as it is'" (823). There is a need evinced here to move from false representations to true narrative, and this epistemology is not disrupted throughout the revision processes that Rinaldi describes. One man, Glenn, arrives at the conclusion that because he had been too busy feeling sorry for himself, he had allowed his relationship with his sons to lapse. During the course of the workshop, Glenn renews these ties, which Rinaldi speculates is a result of the revision process. I find her suggestion convincing. From Glenn's perspective, because writing has helped him uncover the truth about himself--that he was wallowing in self pity--he is able to make a change in his life. But it seems to me that the change is spurred on not by the realization that there are different lenses through which he might understand his experience, as Rinaldi's argument

implies, but rather because he believes this newly discovered perspective is the correct, more accurate one: he sees the truth about himself. His belief in this truth empowers him to act. As Glenn comes to terms with the demotion he must accept at work, his new truth leads him into a position of accommodation where "the tensions between self and society expressed earlier in his narrative" are transformed into a redefinition of "himself in terms of socially acceptable goals" (828).

This last observation by Rinaldi raises some concerns for me about the adapting function of healing narratives and to what extent they then hold or don't hold counterhegemonic potential as public texts. To the extent that healing narratives parallel psychotherapeutic processes that seek to adjust the subject to fit better within cultural norms, how transformative can such narratives be? Put another way: if writing about trauma or illness can "cure" by reestablishing the victim within a narrative, what is the nature of that narrative and thus the nature of the cure? I think this is an important point to consider in terms of adopting writing-to-heel for the classroom, especially with regard to locating such writing within critical pedagogy's purview. Rinaldi implies that the MS narratives are, by the very assertion of their existence, disruptive of a culture that stigmatizes and cancels the disabled, and she is interested in helping writers further challenge dominant discourses as they write about their disease. Barbara Kamler makes a similar claim in her work with women writing about aging: by interrupting dominant narratives on aging, "it is possible for older women to tell other stories" (57). But the question of audience is

I think an important but undertheorized aspect of writing-to-heal studies. In her description of conducting the writing workshop, Rinaldi says she made "an effort to conduct the writing process within the twin goals of expressivist and social constructionist pedagogy to help the group evolve both personal and community voices" (823). From the context of her article, I understand the "expressivist" strand to focus on writers exploring and formulating an identity of empowerment in relation to their illness. But it is not clear to me in what way community voices come into play in the construction of these narratives. Maybe Rinaldi is referring to the fact that the writing takes place within a group that functions as an immediate audience as well as a resource of support. Or perhaps she means community in a looser sense, as a synonym for public, and a discursive location into which writers insert their narratized experiences.

But the functions of accommodation and adaptation in the healing narrative warrant some attention. Nancy Welch offers an interesting suggestion about what she sees as the American ego psychology perspective that undergirds composition's understanding of revision, one of the important processes by which narratives achieve their healing capacity (Hawkins Reconstructing). According to Welch, composition practices are inflected "by a problematic form of Freudianism: American ego psychology and its focus on equipping individuals to adapt to social structures without any accompanying critique and revision of those structures" (44). She sees American ego psychology as underwriting "composition's most basic assumptions about revision as a process of adapting to

generic conventions and reader expectations, as a process of increasing orientation toward, rather than examination of and intervention in, a particular thesis statement or a particular discourse community." This view produces an "understanding of revision as ego reinforcement and the suppression of all that is unruly and restless" (59). Welch's critique is aimed particularly at the composition accommodationists, such as Bartholomae and other academic discourse proponents, who see the teaching of writing as a way of helping people fit into a particular discourse community. But her ideas have relevance for writing-to-heel. While Rinaldi enacts her workshops with the hope that participants will indeed interrogate the prevailing discourse of illness, the place of "socially acceptable goals" that Glenn arrives at suggests the adaptation to social structures that Welch criticizes as being a cornerstone of the revision process. Welch's observations about revision prompt me to consider the role it plays in narratives of healing. To what extent does the healing function depend on locating the self within a normative discourse and what are the implications of this dependence when considering the place of writing-to-heel in the classroom?

Examples do abound, of course, where members of nondominant groups compose narratives that are healing precisely because of their counterhegemonic properties. When the dominant cultural discourse disqualifies the knowledge of such groups, to use Foucault's terms, the assertion of these experiences through narrative produces a simultaneous personal healing and public cleansing. Such narratives can negate the cancellation of nondominant perspectives and

thereby allow writers to locate themselves within a discourse, which in turn can reduce the writer's feelings of alienation and isolation. Writers write themselves and their experiences into existence by producing testimonial narratives that are beneficial not only to the individual writer but to the larger cultural rhetoric. But such intervention is not unproblematic, and it runs in particular the risk of essentializing. Feminists, for example, have noted the difficulty of synecdochically allowing what one woman thinks or experiences to stand in for what women think and experience (Brady 28) and the conservative trajectory such essentializing narratives can produce when ethical authority proceeds from identity-based declarations (Fuss). In the case of silenced groups, "The act of speaking out in and of itself transforms power relations and subjectivities" (Alcoff and Gray 260). Yet to what extent are such disclosures engendered through, or reappropriated by, conservative confessional discourse, and is this reappropriation counterproductive to healing or a necessary part of it? In order to show just how thorny an issue this is, I will now look at the example of "survivor discourse" and the questions it raises about the politics of writing and healing.

A discussion of writing-to-heal seems inevitably to lead us to confront the relationship among therapeutic narratives, testimony, and the confessional genre, especially with regard to the question of survivorship. Laura Gray-Rosendale points out that a more contemporary incarnation of Western culture's confession occurs in the talk show forum with the favored topics of sexual assault and abuse. In her article

"Constraining Talk Show Cultures," Gray-Rosendale takes on the formidable task of articulating an alternative rhetoric to the sensationalist discourse that currently structures discussions of sexual abuse and other personal trauma. Citing feminist cultural theory that allies the talk show genre with Foucault's regime of confession, Gray-Rosendale describes the following generic formula at work in most talk show treatments of topics such as abuse:

an exposition (introduction of the subject or problem), the establishment of the conflict (who is involved and how), further complication, the introduction of an expert (usually a therapist or psychoanalyst), questioning the expert, the beginning of a resolution, and a short speech by the expert or television host concerning the problem in question. (154-55)

Gray-Rosendale implies that this pat construction contributes to exploitation of the victims by locking them into that hegemonic role, although it is not completely clear to my mind how the structure itself does this. Elsewhere, she offers a more elaborate consideration of the way talk shows shift the focus of abuse away from a patriarchal etiology to an emphasis on the personal trauma of the victim, thereby reinscribing the survivor's testimony within the power relations of confession. Specifically, rather than positioning abuse "in the social sphere where it rightfully belongs" (Alcoff and Gray 261), talk shows, through the paternalistic mediation of an "expert," locate the problem in "the individual psyche" and thus "soften the challenge" (274) that survivor testimony makes to the larger cultural

narrative of blame, disbelief, and titillation.

As a counter to this confessional prescription, Gray-Rosendale offers narratives by two students writing about their sexual abuse. She argues that these narratives work to break down the talk show formula through a narrative rhetoric similar to that which some scholars, such as Susan Jarratt, have associated with Sophist rhetoric: a partial, contingent discourse that resists totalizing truths and outcomes. Gray-Rosendale sees the students' stories as "resisting the narrative resolution of the confessional structure and resisting the oppression that came with the assault." As a result, students can write themselves into "a new identity, that of courageous survivor" (150). Gray-Rosendale makes two moves here that warrant a closer investigation. The first is the equation in the parallel structure of her sentence with "resisting narrative resolution" and "resisting oppression." The second is the conclusion she reaches about a "new identity" that culminates in the uninterrogated category of "survivor."

On the one hand, I question whether resisting resolution necessarily results in resisting oppression, and I will return to this question of narrative structure. But for right now I wonder, on the other hand, whether the rhetorical identity of "survivor" is any more disruptive of the confessional narrative than the victim identity constructed through the talk show formula. While Gray-Rosendale argues, I think correctly, that the sensationalist talk show formula "interprets and evaluates the confessor's discourse according to dominant cultural codes," I question whether "survivor discourse," with its "new identity," is not equally generic

and subject to such hegemonic codes, especially to the extent that this "new identity" is allied with therapeutic discourse. In another treatment of this subject, Gray-Rosendale asks whether "the act of speaking out" about abuse has "simply replayed confessional modes which recuperate dominant patriarchal discourses without subversive effect, or has it been able to create new spaces within these discourses and to begin to develop an autonomous counterdiscourse, one capable of empowering survivors?" (Alcoff and Gray 275) The problem here is that "empowerment" is left undefined, although she hints, tautologically, that it might consist of survivors being able to "speak out" without their voices being disqualified by "experts" who compel and control the confessional disclosure. But by definition, the "empowered" speech and subjectivity of the "survivors" will also be constrained, enabled, and legitimated through discursive constructs. Despite her attempts to distinguish survivor testimony from uninterpreted "raw data" (Alcoff and Gray), in key ways she ends up treating it as such, granting a kind of autonomy to the interiority of the survivors. But as Sidonie Smith reminds us, interiority does not exist as narration's *a priori* but rather the reverse: "Interiority became an effect, and not a cause, of the cultural regulation of always already identified bodies" (19).

What currency does the identity of "survivor" have; among what audience; for what purpose? From what discourses does survivor rhetoric derive? To put these questions in a specific context, for what reason did the students of Gray-Rosendale's analysis compose their narratives about abuse (a question always worth asking about any writing assignment)?

These questions are left unanswered (although perhaps answers are implied) in Gray-Rosendale's account.<sup>3</sup> For example, it is not clear with whom the students shared their work; with the rest of the class as a writing group or with the instructor only. After all, critiques of the "expert's" role in confessional narratives ultimately rely on a consideration of the expert's position as audience. A student-to-teacher communication dynamic that "respects" cultural boundaries of privacy would seem to reinscribe the instructor in that problematic role of receiver of secrets. However, opening the narratives up to the public scrutiny of the classroom community is no guarantee either of a disruption of the confession, as evidenced by the part "community" plays in the talk-show drama.

Is there a difference between the role of receiver of the confession and the role of witness? I am using the term "witness" here as Shoshana Felman uses it to describe the audience's relationship to Holocaust testimony--a kind of bearing witness to a bearing witness. Gray-Rosendale does not use the term witness, but I imagine that that is more the position she wishes the instructor and perhaps the rest of the writing group or class to stand in relation to the students' constructions of their abuse experiences. As a receiver of confession, the teacher functions as a normative recipient, but as a witness to testimony, she ensures that the narrative truth claims of the students' stories are not erased or disappeared by a dominant cultural narrative. Absent an explicit discussion of audience and purpose, I am left to infer from Gray-Rosendale's account that she assumes a constructionist rhetoric in which students write to create

a truth that helps them achieve a sense of agency after being rendered powerless by the experience of abuse. They are not writing, then, to produce testimonies that would perform the cultural work of disrupting talk show formulas for a larger audience (although certainly these two purposes are not mutually exclusive but rather intertwined). They are writing to resist engulfment by the talk-show confession. Gray-Rosendale specifies that, in the case of the narrative by Maria, this resistance occurs as a result of Maria's awareness of the constructed nature of texts.

But the question of agency seems bound up in the question of audience. If students are constructing narratives for themselves to revise their disabling memories, does this brand of constructionism slip into what might better be described as univocal rhetoric (see Chapter Four) in which, rather than construct, students are writing to discover and express the truth about their experience without necessarily understanding the discourses that comprise it? As I discussed earlier, I think that such a move of belief may be necessary for a narrative to function in a healing way for its writer--that is, in a way that gives the writer a sense of agency. Moreover, Gray-Rosendale's analysis inadvertently highlights the way a constructionist perspective can be problematic in relation to a consideration of audience. Praising Maria's text, Gray-Rosendale writes

the Prologue to the text communicates Maria's desire as a writer to place the reader at the center of her narrative. Maria tells the reader to become an active constructor of the text itself rather than engage in a passive act of reading. . .

. The reader, then, is being called upon not only to take part in the literacy autobiography that will unfold but to create her or his own version of the narrative offered itself. (145)

Gray-Rosendale expressly says, then, that this text is not relying on a romantic notion of truth-telling. What I find myself wondering is whether resisting this stance is indeed empowering of the student or disruptive of the confessional genre. Exactly how does the prologue make for an empowering, transgressive account? Gray-Rosendale identifies as one of the disturbing, confessional attributes of the talk show the submission of abuse victims' experience to the regulation and interpretation of the "expert." While Maria is not, presumably, inviting readers to impose their judgments on her abuse in the same way someone fulfilling the role of talk show expert would, I still wonder whether Maria's relinquishing of meaning-making of her experience to the reader results in a tantamount loss of control and agency. Again, context is important in puzzling this out. Whom did Maria see as the readers of this narrative, and what sort of reception did she expect them to give it?

I see a parallel here to an argument made by Tuzyline Allan in which she contrasts the essayistic styles of Virginia Woolf and Alice Walker. Allan makes the claim that Woolf's Modernist exploration of collectivity in her texts, her use of the pronoun "we," results in an effacing of the the self that is not a viable textual strategy for an African-American author like Walker. Walker's subject position is such that she cannot afford the dissolving of self that Woolf sees as liberating. Instead Walker must use

her non-fiction to assert the self, even as she locates it within the voices of the African-American community. I see Maria's experience of abuse as possibly putting her in the same position that Allan identifies for Walker. Can Maria, in this sense, afford to create a textual space that allows the reader so much control over the narrated experience? Gray-Rosendale's commentary about Maria's strategy raises another question for me regarding the relationship between testimony and authenticity. Consider, for example, the controversy surrounding the factual accuracy of Rigoberto Menchu's account of abuse visited upon indigenous people. The contested knowledge that Menchu's narrative produces poses for us these questions: what is the contract of testimony? What are its truth claims? In order for testimony to be effective, need it be factual? In some ways the answer to the last question seems to be yes--that there must be a certain fixity to the testimonial if it is to have value as a public text. The testimonial cannot afford to allow the hearer "to create her or his own version of the narrative."

Gray-Rosendale also sees, in the text's nonsequential movement between past and present, that "Maria's recounting transforms temporal relations and thereby advances an implicit criticism on the reader's attempt to totalize this experience or to assess it within one particular framework of understanding" (148). In her experience with abuse narratives, Gray-Rosendale has found this disjunction to be a seemingly essential story-telling technique in articulating the experience of the trauma. I am interested in the way nonsequential narration might be important for testimony and

healing narratives, but the style of the student writing that Gray-Rosendale describes as being discontinuous and partial does not, it seems to me, lead inexorably to a disruption of the confessional structure, as I indicated earlier. I think such a disruption would depend less on formal features of the text and more on the extrinsic factor of the relationship between rhetor and audience, a relationship which does much to determine the cultural function of narration.

Frankly, it is difficult for me to apprehend the difference between portions of the student Maria's narrative about rape and the transcription of the talk show that Gray-Rosendale offers by way of contrast. Gray-Rosendale emphasizes that in Maria's account, no Oprah-like figure presides over the confession asking whether the victim resisted the rapist, and, as a result, the depiction Maria gives is more complex and not simply reducible to a narrative about whether or not the victim said no. I see this complexity in Maria's account, but although her narrative is not interrupted by an interlocutor, it still seems marked by the the same confessional urgency and detailing as the talk-show confession:

I don't remember how it started but pretty soon things went too far. I woke up one night to find Robbie on top of me. I didn't say anything. I guess I was in shock. I pretended to be asleep and I tried to turn over but he held me down. Neither Beverly nor my mother would have believed me if I said anything. And I hadn't been in school long enough to build up any type of trust so I couldn't tell the teachers. Rob knew that I wouldn't say

anything so it kept happening. After a few weeks, Freddie started saying that he got whatever his brother got. Freddie and I were about the same size so I wasn't as intimidated by his size but he was crazy. He had threatened to kill me on several occasions and I knew that he meant it. At that time, I sort of knew what rape was but not that it was happening to me. I knew that I didn't like what was going on but I never said anything about it. There was nobody for me to say anything to. Besides, these were guys that I trusted who had on several occasions protected me from other people.

(146)

This rhetoric may in part be preferable to that of the talk show's in its more nuanced rendering of the dynamics of the silencing surrounding sexual coercion. But it still bears marks of the confession, and what's more, may be understood as being called into existence precisely through the generic space that the technology of confession has opened in the cultural fabric. The story also owes a debt to another discourse about abuse, one that is more socially progressive and empowering for women but no less generic for that and not, I don't think, independent of the talk-show variety. The themes of trust and silence that appear in Maria's text are features of the therapeutic discourse of abuse survivors. While these themes serve Maria, and no doubt others, well under these circumstances, their existence raises questions about the prescriptive potential of any survivor discourse, talk-show variety or other. For example, in Chapter One, I discussed Dan Morgan's student, who wrote

what Morgan considered an "appalling" narrative justifying a father's alcoholism. Where would this account fall on the continuum of survivor rhetoric? Would such rhetoric be elastic enough to accommodate the student's attempts to see complexity in the father's behavior, or would her essay be in violation of the ethos of empowerment that surviving suggests and therefore be disqualifiable?

The infusion of therapeutic discourse into many of the "personal" areas that become the subject of healing narrations causes me to wonder whether it is possible, or desirable, to disentangle the healing function of narratives from the psychotherapeutic. Does the very word "healing" suggest a medicalized perspective embedded in that discourse? As I asked in Chapter One, is it possible to stake out a different rhetorical claim for such narratives, one that would include the category of cultural work? Would attention to audience add another dimension to the rhetoric of healing that might profitably move us beyond the psychotherapeutic lens? These are some of the questions that I am left with after reviewing the scholarship on writing and healing and after working with the organization Gilda's Club. In the following pages, I describe my experience there and some of the writing that was produced as a result of my work with people with cancer. By offering this description, I hope to further contextualize some of these theoretical difficulties.

#### Writing My Story: the Cancer Narrative

Gilda's Club was founded by Gene Wilder after the death of Gilda Radner to honor her wishes that there be a space for people with cancer, their friends and family, to gather for

support. Various activities and support groups are available, among them writing classes taught by volunteers. I initially contacted Gilda's Club with the intent of observing a class, but after explaining to the director, Catherine, my work as a writing instructor and Ph.D. student and my inquiry into writing and healing as well as my experience with writing about my mother's death from cancer, we decided that I should offer a workshop myself. Although I have been teaching college writing for quite some time, I had never worked outside the classroom. Furthermore, I was, and continue to be, uncertain about the nature of the subjectivity promoted in healing narratives. How would I gear this workshop? What did I hope people would gain from it?

Given these uncertainties, I decided to proceed from my own invested interest in writing about cancer by thinking about my motivations for telling my story of my mother's death. My initial impulse was to focus the writing group towards bereavement and surviving friends and family who wanted to write about their experience with a loved one's illness, a process with which I felt I had some experience. But I learned from Catherine that it was Gilda's Club's policy that all activities be open to all members. Therefore, I could not limit the workshop to bereavement only. I ultimately composed this brief description for the class, which was included in the monthly calendar that Gilda's Club uses to notify members of available activities and services:

*Writing the Story*

*This workshop is for members who want to write the*

*story of their experience with cancer, whether their own or that of a loved one, including the experience of bereavement. Our focus will be on crafting the story we feel must be told.*

I made the decision to focus on using the cancer experience to create a story rather than use the story to effect healing, and I tried to make the description reflect this perspective. In pursuing this emphasis, I was following Charles Anderson's advice that in teaching the writing of healing narratives, we should use what we understand about the teaching of writing generally to promote construction of the narrative (Writing CCCC), a claim made in part to ward off the criticisms about teachers playing pseudo therapists. While I was not particularly vulnerable to such charges since I was operating outside of the university system, I wanted my approach to match my own felt understanding about the purpose of writing about cancer. The approach I would take then was to combine what I knew about conducting a college writing class with what it was like to feel compelled to write about a cancer death. I discovered later that I was inadvertently adhering to Louise DeSalvo's belief that the healing narrative "lies in finding the story that hasn't been told, that must be told, and in exploring the feelings that narrative engenders--in writing it down" (32). I would add that while I hoped the emotional dimensions of the class's narratives would be explored, I had in mind a more expanded understanding of emotional, distinct from the usual impoverished definition of *de facto* "inner feelings" and one in which, as described by the anthropologists Lyla Abu-Lughod and Catherine Lutz, ". . . the reality of emotion is social,

cultural, political, and historical" (18). In their more discourse-oriented view of emotion, Abu-Lughod and Lutz argue that:

We should view emotional discourse as a form of social action that creates effects in the world, effects that are read in a culturally informed way by the audience for emotion talk. Emotion can be said to be created in . . . speech in the sense that it is postulated as an entity in language where its meaning to social actors is also elaborated. (12)

After I submitted the blurb to the director, she suggested I change the title to "Writing My Story." I agreed. "Writing My Story," then, was to run for four, two-hour weekly sessions in the month of September. Catherine explained to me that one of the limitations I had to contend with was sporadic attendance due to participants' changing health situations. There might be people who could attend all four workshops, but members' plans were always subject to change. Because of this, I needed to think of each session as being somewhat autonomous and yet with enough continuity between sessions to benefit ongoing attendees. This was challenging, but I decided to break the workshops down in the following way: 1. an introduction with discussion about motivations for wanting to write about cancer; 2. writing from a photograph or other visual image (an idea I borrowed from Emily Nye's work with AIDS diagnosees); 3. narrating a specific scene from the cancer experience; 4. writing a connecting rationale for exercises two and three to show how both pieces of writing were part of the same story. If new

participants attended the last session, I figured I could direct them to try either the scene or photograph prompt while others worked on the connective piece. I realized that my experience with teaching writing to underprepared freshman students who all don't always "do their homework" came in handy with helping me plan a workshop for writers who wouldn't all be on the same page, literally. I decided too that there would not be any "homework," given the situation that Catherine described, but that we would do the assignments during the two-hour sessions.

At the first meeting, on September 7, twelve members attended: all women except for John; all white. (This continues to be the case throughout our meetings--white women make up the group with the exception of three African-American women who attend at later dates.) Our assigned room was the art studio, which was equipped with two long tables and not the most comfortable folding chairs. Still the room was pleasant, as is the entire space where Gilda's Club is housed on Houston Street in lower Manhattan. (The celebrity support for Wilder's endeavor shows.) I felt the usual trepidation I do before meeting with a class of people who are expecting me to enact the miracle of teaching, but in this case this feeling was heightened by my awareness that I really did not know what I was doing. Based on my ongoing reading about this subject and my own connection to it, I was going to, as it were, make it up as I went along. I didn't come right out and say this, but I did try to be straightforward with the group, telling them that I was a college writing teacher with a background in creative writing who was trying to get a Ph.D. (which John does not

understand: "You're a writer," he tells me at the end of the session, "what would you want a Ph.D. for?) and had an interest in the concept of writing and healing. I also told them about my own connection to cancer: my mother's death from breast cancer; my oldest sister's diagnosis; and the way gynecologists go into paroxysms as soon as I answer their question about "any family history?" (The joke had currency. People with cancer, I was to learn, often have a great sense of humor.) I also tried to explain how I felt about writing the story of my mother's death: that it wasn't just about catharsis; that I felt there was a story that I wanted other people to know about and how that seemed to be important to the way I told the story.

I began the way I begin any writing course--with writing. In this case I asked group members to write about what their interest was in taking the class, what they hoped to accomplish, what motivated them to want to write about their experience. I then asked people to introduce themselves and read something from what they had written. What emerged was a rich portrait of individuals with connecting and divergent reasons for being in the class. Most of the participants had or had had cancer, but two members had lost family (some of those with cancer had also had family or friends who had succumbed to the disease). Listening to people read was a poignant yet unsentimental experience.<sup>4</sup> Mary, who had lost her husband to colon cancer some months back, fought back tears and said she just wanted to make sense of the experience and she thought writing about it might help her do that. Most people articulated some sense of this, although many exhibited a remarkable sense of

control and acceptance about their disease, especially, understandably, those who were in remission. (Of the members who took all the workshops, three were in long-term remission and one, Mary, was a family member of a cancer victim.) Many also expressed the idea that there was something about their experience they thought others would benefit from hearing, especially others with cancer. Larissa told a remarkable story about how she had been diagnosed with a stage four cancer, was given six months to live, and seven years later, she was still here. She thought there was a lot people could learn from her journey. I introduced the phrase "cultural work" with regard to the function that such narratives could perform. Roberta was quite taken with this idea. "Yes," she agreed enthusiastically, "in some ways it's an obligation to talk about what I went through."

For the second half of this session, I handed out photocopies of "Real Life?" the piece I wrote, which was published in Scratching the Surface: Cancer as a Woman's Issue. I asked everyone to do a modified version of Ann Berthoff's double-entry notebook, something I often do in my writing classes to facilitate student response to a text. In this version, the reader writes responses and commentary in the right-hand side, leaving the left side blank for another's remarks. In this way, a written conversation is created about the text. I was very nervous about offering my piece to the group. I wondered what they would think about it. I worried about revisiting this writing that I had done twelve years before and what it would mean to go back to it. (I made sure that I read it through the night before to gird myself for the emotions it would arouse in me. How terrible

it would be if I started crying, I thought. I sympathized with Mary who was always so concerned about breaking down in front of people whenever she tried to discuss her husband's death.) I worried too that writing about death was an inappropriate subject to give to people who were struggling to overcome their own life threatening disease, but I guessed that the calendar description had given sufficient warning about the topic.

The response to the piece was overwhelmingly positive, unlike any I had gotten before in its sheer intensity. I remember thinking: it's found its audience. Roberta exploded: "You've said so much of what I wanted to say." "Now I know how to start my piece," said Diane who wanted to write about her father's death. People read from their double-entry notebooks. Many of the responses focused on the formal and thematic aspects of the text, in particular the controlling metaphor of the split person and the device of breaking off from a scene by marking it with asterisks and jumping to another scene. I remembered what Gray-Rosendale asserts about the disrupted narrative feature that seems to play such an important role in enabling abuse survivors to articulate their stories. I suggested that it might be useful for people to think in terms of specific scenes and not feel as though they had to write in a chronological order from beginning to end, which often makes the narrative process daunting. I also suggested that they be on the look out for a controlling image or metaphor to function as an enabling frame for their experience (here I think of Charles Anderson's student who discovered that the refinishing of a table created a metaphor for her drug abuse recovery

("Suture") and also Mark Allister's discussion about the distancing function of metaphor in therapeutic writing). We discussed some themes that seem to be common to the experience of cancer--the issue of control, both of physical bodies and as a more abstract issue; the positive and negative disruption caused by illness; confrontations with doctors.

The hour concluded, and most participants seemed eager to return the following week (see note 4). I told them that the next time we met we would work with a photograph or other picture and, if anyone felt so inclined, to bring in an extra image in case new participants arrived. I would try to do the same. I felt energized by the experience and a genuine sense of privilege at having been allowed to speak and work with these people. I was looking forward to a continued relationship and what they could teach me. We departed from each other thinking we would meet the following Friday. That was not to be. In the intervening week, September 11 happened, and Gilda's Club, being below 14th Street, was closed. When it reopened in time for the following week's session, only four of the original participants returned. In general, there was very little activity at the Club that week, even though they had reopened their doors. With the exception of one person, I never saw the others again (I wished I had thought to get a list of phone numbers), and I was left to wonder. Catherine had warned me that members plans were subject to change. Indeed. As I walked to the Club, down Sixth Avenue with its gaping new skyline and past walls papered with photos of the missing, I wondered where writing about cancer fit into this changed landscape.

In the weeks that followed, a national discourse emerged about healing, one that I found to be disturbingly incomplete. On academic listservs and elsewhere, people vehemently resisted attempts to introduce political discussion into the plausible reactions to the devastation. Such commentary was disqualified by labeling it offensive, inappropriate, tactless, and partisan--with calls for people to be allowed to mourn. I remember one such post which asked people to stop politicking and to provide instead "meaningful" comfort. Given what I had been studying, I was drawn to the way healing was being defined. The rhetorical construction of healing in these exchanges attempted to be apolitical, a frozen discourse that admits no narratized movement but instead keeps in place a reified, fetishized, monolithic "mourning." What would it mean to comfort in a "meaningful" way if not to inject exactly the context that so many people were seeking to keep out? It strikes me that this reaction exemplifies the frozen moment associated with trauma (MacCurdy "Trauma"), the moment that must be narratized if healing is to occur. What the email defines is not the process of healing but rather the traumatic response itself, the resistance to narrative. It is the shocked moment that precedes that process. Perhaps this is the difference between mourning and healing. In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud wrote that "in mourning time is needed for the command of reality-testing to be carried out" (589). Mourning, then, may exclude political, historical, social dimensions, but healing must include them.

The four members that show up for the post nine-eleven workshop are Julie, Larissa, Mary, and John. They will

continue to be the core group, although other, new participants will attend the later sessions. Except for Larissa, everyone has brought a photograph. Larissa, the woman who was diagnosed with a stage four cancer, has brought instead of the photograph, a newspaper headline clipping about the attack. She says she has all kinds of ideas that she wants to write about in connection to the World Trade Center bombing. My instruction for today's assignment: write about the photograph and explain how it is part of your story about cancer that you want to tell. People read their responses. Mary's and Larissa's in particular get my attention.

Larissa, who is a prolific writer, has tried to draw connections to the attack on the World Trade Center and the experience of being diagnosed with cancer. She's written copiously of the effect of disruption, of the turning inside out of what you came to count on to be true. What people experienced in hearing about the World Trade Center is what it is like to be diagnosed with cancer. (Another participant at a later workshop makes a similar assertion when she writes the incredible story of how she was at a biopsy appointment on September 11 and therefore not in her office in the World Trade Center that day.) Larissa also makes note of the military rhetoric that has flooded the public talk and of the military metaphors that are so often invoked in cancer, which she deplors. She concludes that both cancer and the World Trade Center are a call to reexamine our connection to the world and our lives.

Larissa is very unhappy with this piece. "What do you think the problem is?" I ask. "It's too big and at the same

time too small," she replies. "You've made a lot of really powerful connections," I say. "It lacks--structure," she says despairingly. John disagrees with her and outlines the structure he sees in it. She is still dissatisfied. I explain to her that my thinking behind the photograph assignment was that it would push people into writing in a very concrete way about a small part of the experience. I say that I thought this would make the task of trying to write less intimidating and would help give focus. (In this I am following what I have gleaned from the writing-to-heal folks: narrate concretely.) And yet I like what Larissa has done and I tell her so. I admire the way she has tried to make the two incidents, her cancer and September 11, mutually inform and reflect each other; that she has seen each as a metaphor for the other.

Larissa says she really admires Mary's piece, and I do, too. Mary, the bereaved widow, was barely able to write more than a few sentences when we first met. She said she was intimidated by how much everyone else was able to write, and she worried about losing emotional control in front of the group. Mary's photograph is a picture of Mary, her husband, his cousin and her husband. She has written about a time after Charles, her husband, was diagnosed but before he became very ill. The cousins who came for a visit were unaware of Charles' cancer. "We" decided not to tell them, Mary has written, in order to enjoy the day. She describes the passing of a pleasant afternoon with Charles being his usual entertaining self. The piece finishes darkly as Mary remarks that looking at the photo of the smiling group, who would have guessed that Charles would be dead thirteen months

later?

Remembering Anderson's and others' advice to consider where there are gaps in the text, I tell Mary that I notice she doesn't say much about what she felt during this incident. "What do you mean?" she asks, with a bit of alarm in her voice. "You use the word 'we' a lot," I remark, but not the word 'I.' I wonder what you thought about the decision to keep the secret." The rest of the group echoes this in a gentle, supportive way. "I'd be interested in hearing about what you were thinking," encourages Larissa. This flusters Mary. She says in a half-joking way: "Wait a minute. I was willing to go along with writing about this photograph but if you are going to ask me to talk about myself, I don't know if I can agree to that." After our laughter subsides, I ask why. "Well, because," Mary stammers, "this is Charles' story that I want to tell--I don't want to bleed all over the page." The rest of the group points out that it is her story, too. I repeat the old adage: the story is always in some ways about the teller. But what I notice is that in her last statement, Mary has revised her purpose for writing. I remind her that she initially said that she just wanted to try to make some sense of it all and she thought that writing could help her do that. She considers this and decides that that is still valid. I tell her my suspicions--that in order to do that, she might need to write herself into the narrative. And maybe, I say, there is a way to do it without bleeding all over the page, as she fears and which I understand that she would not want to do.

The following week, both Mary and Larissa do something

remarkable.

Both of them knew what the assignment would be for today--depicting a very specific scene or incident--and so they had started working on it at home. There is a big group today--nine people, which includes the core four (although John must leave early) and a repeater from the first day, Cecily. It is a good group. It is at this session that we get the idea to do a performance, a reading of the group's work as a social activity for the Club (this unfortunately does not come to pass). As one of the new participants, Bobbi says, hearing the stories read side by side as we went around the group is powerful. (In the evaluations that participants are asked to fill out by Gilda's Club, people frequently listed "hearing others' stories" as a best feature of the workshop.) There is a wealth of information and experience here. I unveil my idea that I would like the group to put together a booklet as a modest publication goal, something that we could place in the waiting room or library of Gilda's Club where members might read it. (This idea comes from my thinking about the question of audience in writing and healing. My hypothesis is that having this goal might help define the narrative shape and purpose of the groups' writings and become a resource of sorts for other members of the Club.) People are enthusiastic, the temper is synergistic (but ultimately only the core members will end up participating in this project--see appendix).

There is good writing all around, but everyone is particularly riveted by Larissa's and Mary's offerings. (As the returning Cecily remarked upon hearing them: I see a lot has happened since the first class.) Larissa has composed a

captivating scene about her experience with a New Age healer. She writes with humor and criticism and vivid detail about the encounter, criticizing both alternative and traditional healers, asserting her agency to make choices. This, I think, is what I hope the healing narrative can be, a nexus of public and private, a personal empowering and a cultural criticism, each position informing the other. Mary's piece is different and yet I feel the same sense of triumph. She has chosen to write about the very end of her story, the scene where she misses her husband's death in the hospital by arriving literally two minutes too late. She is filled with remorse that he had to die alone.

What is so astounding to me about this narrative is that, unlike last week's episode where Mary was written out of the text, in this one she is the star. She has chosen to write about a moment where her husband is incapacitated in the hospital and so necessarily has no dramatic role in the scene. Instead, the focus is on Mary and her actions. Indeed the narration is almost like a filmic pan, the camera dollying as Mary moves from getting the early morning phone call to come to the hospital to her ill-timed arrival. The writing is powerfully minimalist in its depiction. There is no "bleeding on the page," and yet Mary is firmly the focus here, speaking her "I." She reads unfalteringly until she arrives at the end where her voice cracks and she displays the emotion she so dreads. She is angry at herself for allowing this to happen. (In another discussion, Mary makes the observation that many people seem to be able to write about cancer with humor and she wishes that she could do that. But, as she says, to her it is just not funny.)

It seems to me that based on our discussion of the prior week, Mary has been able to adjust her textual representation to include herself. It is an example, then, of how the text of this experience with cancer can be revised; can be told from a different perspective. Will it prove empowering to Mary? In what sense? She is happy that she has been able to write the scene. In just a few weeks she has gone from only being able to list a few vague sentences about her grief as a widow to narrating two detail-filled scenes.

But there are more silences in the group's work that need to be addressed. Bobbi, an African-American woman attending for the first time (this will also be her last time, she says, because she will be returning to work next week and won't be able to come to a daytime class) has written about her experience of being diagnosed with breast cancer. She describes the details of the doctor's office that the group members recognize. (I notice often that when we read, people nod and sigh in recognition upon hearing another member's experience. In discussion, there is a sense of camaraderie and of experts speaking to each other about situations they understand so well.) Bobbi recounts the motions she must go through on that day. I notice that she repeatedly punctuates her text with the phrase, "I had no choice." One of the themes that has been emerging in the sessions is the issue of control and agency, so I ask her about the way that sentence peppers her description of the day's events.

Bobbi explains that, in some sense, she had always been waiting for that diagnosis; that it was almost a relief to hear it because the waiting was finally over. She wonders if

in some way she almost didn't conjure her condition; evoke it because of the library of books about cancer that she had been collecting prior to being diagnosed. I find this idea arresting. We have been talking about looking for a controlling trope to organize our stories. I tell Bobbi that I think that idea, of conjuring her own illness, is a powerful one that might work as a frame for her. Why, I ask, were you so certain you would get the disease? She tells about the history of cancer in her family (with which I identify). She cites her obesity. And then she adds: "I am on Premarin, too, so I just knew that I would get it." My immediate thoughts which I do not voice: with these risk factors, why the hell did she start taking Premarin? What insane doctor would prescribe it for her? And, anyhow, why would anyone ever take Premarin, given all the safe alternatives available?

I say none of this. I allow Bobbi to speak and be heard. Other group members respond to the difficulty of her situation. What I have learned from Larissa's piece about the New Age healer is how complicated and difficult it is for people with cancer to sort through their treatment options. In defying the death sentence of her stage four cancer, Larissa embraced both conventional and alternative treatments. She was angry with the New Age healer who criticized her for having started a course of chemo. So it is not up to me to criticize Bobbi's choice to go on Premarin. But considering my obsession with other people's silences, I worry about my own here, and I worry about the limitations of teaching the writing of these cancer narratives. Clearly I am to some extent occupying the role

of nurturer here, of sympathetic listener, of witness. Does this role stop me from pushing the group in the direction of critical analysis; of revising Bobbi's story of how "she had no choice"? Is there an inherent sentimentality here, a narrative kitsch, that pervades these stories of loss and survival and, perhaps more importantly, writes my role as teacher of the workshop? Does my hesitancy to interfere stem from the personal nature of these stories; from the unshakeable feeling that it is not text but life that we are talking about? These subjects are not public enough for me to intervene in?

But I realize that this dilemma I'm experiencing is not new. I have been here countless times before in the college writing classroom, gauging when and how to encourage disruption in the narratives that students' live by, challenging the beliefs they have brought to the classroom. The difficulty, I think, stems not so much from personal subject matter as it does from the ambiguity contained in my role as instructor. How does the nurturer simultaneously occupy the role of critic? This is a foundational paradox of student-centered, critical pedagogy, a divide that must be endlessly negotiated. But what too is behind my feeling that Bobbi's health choices are personal and therefore off limits for engagement? Is it that we are talking about bodies? Or is it, as I suspect, that the discourses of health and medicine are hegemonic, indeed that the notion of privacy in relation to health is implicated in that hegemony? Conventional medical opinions are steeped in invisible ideologies and economic networks that make them seem unassailable. To question the instruction of a doctor is to

cause trouble. It is a radical act. As such the difficulty I am experiencing in beginning a dialogue with Bobbi is the same that occurs with the creation of any counterhegemonic discourse and is not necessarily located in the fact that this is an illness narrative.

Larissa's and Mary's narratives are very different, and they represent for me the different possibilities that such writing can accomplish. Larissa (and Julie, a librarian, who writes about how through her own research she was able to convince doctors confounded by her condition to enact the correct treatment--see appendix) show how writing personal narratives about cancer can function as cultural criticism. Mary's work shows how she can write herself back into a narrative from which she had become strangely absent. Does this amount to a confession? I'm not sure, but perhaps this process will eventually allow her to see a part for herself in her husband's illness and allow her, as she initially desired, "to make some sense" of what had happened.

Mary's motivations for writing continued to evolve. At our last session, she said she wanted to keep writing in order to create an account that she could give to family and friends. Because her husband had wanted to keep his cancer a secret, many people simply did not know what had happened. She wanted them to understand how valiantly Charles had faced his illness. This mix of motives to include an audience coincided with our decision to produce the booklet and our discussion about holding a reading at the Club (which, due to illness and schedule confusion, did not occur). Having these goals gave the narratives an immediate purpose and context and, certainly in the case of Julie, influenced their shape.

She made the decision to write about her research experience because she thought it would be useful for others to know about this treatment. I remain struck by the way the narratives came alive when read for the immediate audience of the writing group, and I continue to be convinced that audience plays an important role in understanding the healing function of illness narratives as rhetorical performance and as differentiated from confession. Many members did experience the workshops in a healing way as attested to in the comments made on the evaluations. As one person wrote: "This workshop has a therapeutic component."

While I think much of what took place was positive for both me and the members, certain dynamics were troubling, in particular the dependence participants seemed to develop on my approval and the strain I felt that placed me under. In our last session, I asked the group to write about how they thought their projects were progressing. Mary wrote of her frustration at trying to follow what she called "Wendy's way." We laughed at the joke, but I sensed something serious in her coining of that term. Larissa wanted me to take home and "fix" her piece for the booklet and seemed taken aback when I explained that I did not see that as my function. In general, there was a strong need to please me and for me to see what they were doing as special. Proponents of psychoanalytic pedagogy see the transference process as an inevitable consequence of the teacher/student relationship. Perhaps that claim is valid, and especially so when people are trying to enact through writing experiences of vulnerability. I think to a certain extent the nurturing stance I took reenacted the drama of the confessional in its

psychotherapeutic garb. And I think too about the gendered role of that nurturing stance.

But I also believe that the interaction of the group members helped mitigate to some degree the establishment of this dynamic. Just as the instructor in the college classroom can (in limited and qualified ways to be sure) decenter and redistribute the authority of the teacher throughout the class, so too can this happen in an instructional situation outside the university. The difficulty in doing so occurred here absent the teacher's connection with institutional authority. I was not grading the participants in this workshop, but I nonetheless held authority for these writers--as the workshop leader, the published writer--occupying the problematic role of expert. But emphasis on producing work for an audience besides me--that of the writing group and of members of Gilda's Club--helped to disrupt the "expert" claim that I might have over these narratives. I also believe that attendance to audience in this writing group aided in producing the subjectivity of the healing narrative through, as Anne Hawkins says, "completing the bridge between the suffering self and the outside world by an overt act of communication" ("Myths" 241-42).

My consideration of writing and healing has focused on the nature of the relationship between the represented and representing self and the effect context and audience have on that relationship. I have also posited a connection between the healing effect of narrative and its function as cultural criticism, suggesting that each aspect can beneficially inform the other as writers craft their stories. In the next

chapter, I return to the texts and contexts of the college classroom in order to consider further the effects of reception on shaping the narratives of students. In this final chapter, I use the aesthetic and political concept of kitsch to explain the effects of college composition's focus on student subjectivity and development.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am talking about writing-to-heal in the sense of psychological or mental healing. However, writing-to-heal does encompass the physical. Reports by Pennebaker suggest a therapeutic relationship between writing and healing disease and other physical conditions.

<sup>2</sup> Marlene Kadar uses the expansive term "life writing" to describe authorial attempts at representing lived experience. This term subsumes more specific generic classifications such as autobiography or memoir and extends beyond first-person writing.

<sup>3</sup> The student writing that Gray-Rosendale discusses was produced in a class called "Life Writing" (not taught by Gray-Rosendale) in response to an assignment that called for the production of a full-length autobiography.

<sup>4</sup> This is how I felt, but not everyone did. On the evaluation sheets that are filled out at the end of every Gilda's Club activity, a member wrote that discussion about cancer is "too depressing." This was the only negative commentary.

Chapter 4  
Comp, Kitsch, Cliché:  
Bourgeois Realism in the Writing Classroom

How, trapped as we were in the hundred per cent fakery of the real, in the fancy-dress, weeping-Arab kitsch of the superficial, could we have penetrated to the full, sensual truth of the lost mother below? How could we have lived authentic lives? How could we have failed to be grotesque? (The Moor's Last Sigh 184-5)  
Salman Rushdie

Kitsch is a German word born in the middle of the sentimental nineteenth century, and from German it entered all Western languages. Repeated use, however, has obliterated its original metaphysical meaning: kitsch is the absolute denial of shit, in both literal and figurative senses of the word (Unbearable Lightness 248).  
Milan Kundera

Don't let the ink coagulate in your pens. . . . Put your shit on the paper (20).  
Gloria Anzaldúa

As I asserted in Chapter One, the moulding of subjectivity has been at the core of the process movement in composition. Indeed historically in America, as Lester Faigley maintains, "writing teachers were as much or more interested in *whom* they want their students to be as in what they want their students to write" (113). Composition, even in its current-traditionalist mode, is concerned, for better or worse, not merely with the composing of texts but the composing of lives--and thus the ethics of that composition. As Thomas Newkirk observes, "Rationales for literature and composition typically lay out bold moral and civic claims" (70). The "better" aspect of this state of affairs is self-evident: it means that writing is about human lives and human development. But, I would suggest, the "worse" part of this equation derives from this same concern with self-actualizing human development. It is this interest in lives and

development--the subjectivity of the writer--that has invited what I consider to be a kitsch aesthetic to insinuate itself into the practices and scholarship of composition. To understand this trajectory, a look is in order at how kitsch has been defined by theorists, especially those who see a connection between the aesthetic and the political realms.

In an observation that makes just such a linkage, M. Kay Flavell posits the following with regard to kitsch:

in a totalitarian society . . . only idyllic art is tolerated. In an effort to draw the individual away from himself into a communal form of life that moulds personality along narrowly circumscribed lines, dictators tend to promote an easy, unproblematic art which suggests a serene and homogeneous world. (86)

The quintessential, often-evoked example of this easy art promoting a serene world is the relationship between National Socialism and kitsch: in an infamous exhibition, the Nazis banned so-called "decadent art," which irreverently showed a fractured reality not conducive to the idyll of fascism. Instead they endorsed a heroic art meant to inspire belief rather than skepticism. It is this link between politics and aesthetics that the Czech novelist Milan Kundera follows in a logic similar to Flavell's. Kundera emphasizes the connection between kitsch and the appeal of totalitarian regimes, specifically Communist dictatorships. For him, the desire to belong, along with the desires to hide what is inconvenient, unpleasant, or dangerous to know, feeds into totalitarian goals to suppress that which disturbs the perceived ideal and to eliminate deviation, vulnerability,

insecurity, uncertainty, or incompleteness--in essence to eliminate a culture's critical rhetoric, specifically, according to Kundera, through a rhetoric of community.<sup>1</sup>

In her book on kitsch, public policy, and education, Catherine Lugg too relies on this "falsification of art"<sup>2</sup> view of kitsch and its effect on public discourse. In this view, kitsch is defined as suppression of difficult truth in favor of a more palatable, superficial aesthetic of consensus. Throughout her work, Lugg notes the political utility of kitsch and claims that fundamental to the nature of aesthetic and political kitsch is the avoidance of "complex, painful realities" (106). She further maintains that kitsch, as a "symbol rooted in bad art, combines elements of history, cultural mythology, and syrupy emotionalism to shape the direction of the political environment and possible policy prescriptions" (119). In applying her concept of kitsch to the contemporary American political scene, Lugg notes the generic nature of kitsch and its tendency to work in terms of master narrative: ". . . kitsch aids the storyteller by providing a form of rhetorical shorthand. Kitsch works," Lugg tells us, "because most people recognize the symbolic references"(119). It "condenses history, cultural mythology, and emotionalism . . . for ready and pre-digested consumption by the public at large"(120).

What catches my attention in these statements about kitsch is the connection between the formation of subjectivity and aesthetics and its relation to community. In Flavell's remark, idyllic art, or kitsch, is understood to be implicated in the development of personality, and clearly,

as evidenced by the modifier "narrowly circumscribed lines," in a pejorative way. Rationality and individualism are pitted against the communal, a concern we see in Kundera who uses the metaphor of the circle--an image of joining--to describe the suppression of individuality and skepticism that occurred in Eastern European communism. What these statements suggest is twofold: that there is a rhetoric of aesthetics and that art can foster particular kinds of subjectivities, in the case of kitsch a subjectivity that is hegemonically compliant. Kitsch then is a discourse through which power circulates. To me this suggests consequences for writing instruction, in as much as there can be identifiable "aesthetic" principles in operation in the kinds of writing and behavior we elicit in the writing classroom.

Flavell's remark about the attempt to "draw the individual away from himself into a communal form" opens the door for a comparison of comp and kitsch, because this very project--drawing the individual into community--has been a central issue in the rebirth of composition studies. What kind of people do we invite students to be in their writing and in our classrooms and what has motivated our invitations? How broad after all is the net of subjectivity that composition has cast? For compare Flavell's remark, and its clearly-intended negative implications, with a statement from Kenneth Bruffee's "Collaborative Learning and the Conversation of Man": "To think well as individuals we must learn to think well collectively" (88). Indeed the collaborative learning movement is a good place to begin an exploration of how kitsch can be brought to bear on composition, precisely because it highlights the tension

between philosophies of communality and individualism, a tension that has great bearing not only on the "academic discourse" vs. "personal" writing debate that I examined in Chapter One, but as well on the practices of critical pedagogy.

In his explanation of collaborative learning, Bruffee maintains that "What students do when working collaboratively on their writing is not write or edit or, least of all, read proof. What they do is converse" ("Conversation" 91). Bruffee's emphasis on conversation, with its dissemination of authority and expanded vision of literacy, was certainly an essential and progressive counter to prevailing, monologic paradigms of writing that limited our understanding of the composing process's social nature. But I think it is important to acknowledge the ways in which the dialogic promise of Bruffee's "conversation" is undercut by his frequent reference to "consensus" and "agreement." Indeed the reliance on Rorty's concept of "normal discourse" as a key component in Bruffee's construction of "conversation" raises questions about just what kind of conversation this is. It is based on a notion of "discourse community" that, from both Rorty's and Bruffee's perspective, posits a distressingly unified "community," so much so that it allows Bruffee to move unproblematically to an "academic discourse" justification of collaborative learning. He avers hubristically that

Much of what we teach today--or *should be teaching*--in composition courses is the normal discourse of most academic, professional, and business communities. The rhetoric taught in our

composition textbooks comprises--or should comprise--the conventions of normal discourse of those communities. ("Conversation" 89-90) [emphasis added]

This idea of community exemplified in early Bruffee has of course since been problematized through postcolonial, feminist and queer theory, among other perspectives. The key issue is obviously the normative nature of the "conversation" taking place in the "community" and what happens when there is conflict there, as there inevitably must be. Mary Louise Pratt's enormously influential concept of the "contact zone," for example, suggests a very different paradigm of community for the classroom, one in which people, coming together in unequal positions of power, resist homogenization. Feminism, while attracted to the nonconflictual aspect of the collaborative model, has come to question this erasure of conflict and its suppression of difference, notably in the work of Susan Jarratt and bell hooks. And queer theorist Harriet Malinowitz, in her critique of writing in the disciplines, exposes the fallacy of conflict-free community that underlies a belief in unified disciplinary knowledge. As she puts it, "the very notion of the disciplines constricts our vision of what kind of knowledge is possible" ("Disciplines" 300), as a result of this belief in unified fields of knowledge. It is just such a constriction that is at issue for understanding the connection between kitsch and comp, for that is precisely the potential, indeed what underlies the constitution, of the kitsch aesthetic: to shrink what is possible for us to know and write about, and to do so through a technology of consensus.

Despite our evolving understanding of community, I think a critique of Bruffee's seminal work is warranted, because his ideas about collaborative learning have in some ways laid the foundation and terms for the "academic discourse" vs. "personal" writing debate and because much of this original understanding of community is present still in Bruffee's later work. We live with the legacy of Bruffean community in a question that continues to haunt us: to what extent is/should freshman composition be about indoctrination? According to Bruffee "people write in order to be accepted, to join, to be regarded as another member of the culture or community that constitutes the writer's audience" ("Conversation" 95). Bruffee's credibility here derives from his Bakhtinian understanding of language and its inevitable communal basis. But it is one thing to acknowledge that, as Bakhtin poetically put it, "a word is a bridge thrown between myself and another," (933) and quite another matter to put forth a regime of language instruction that insists we must think collectively to think well and that the business of composition ought to be about inculcating disciplinary knowledge. For while we might write to belong, indeed in a cultural sense can only write from some place of belonging, we also might be motivated to write in order to distinguish ourselves; to point out where we differ and are unlike others, and what the political implications of those differences are. While Bruffee acknowledges the importance of "difference" to the dynamic of collaboration, stating that sometimes consensus consists of "agreeing to disagree," (Collaborative) the normalizing umbrella of working towards agreement that the group can "live with" (41) continues to

dominate his pedagogical imperative. The desire through writing to "distinguish ourselves and enhance our individuality" Bruffee labels, as late as 1999, "a peculiar and in some cases harmful by-product" (55) of the writing process.

While the social foundation of language seems indisputable, the Bruffean notion of audience is somewhat more vulnerable to attack. It is, to my mind, largely Aristotelian, which is to say that it is, despite the emphasis on conversation, monologic rather than dialogic in its conception. Much debate in the field has ensued regarding whether Aristotle's conception of audience amounts to a monologic or dialogic theory of rhetoric. Grimaldi, for example, is adamant about disputing Corbett's characterization, in which Aristotle's rhetoric is the equivalent of modern day advertising with its intent on manipulating audience. He is quick to point out that this is a simplistic reduction of the complexity of the Rhetoric and that, indeed, the Rhetoric is nothing less than "an analysis of the nature of human discourse in all areas of knowledge" (Grimaldi 1). In particular, Grimaldi focuses on the diverse nature of the Aristotelian enthymeme, which he describes as a *techne* that "employs both reason, emotion, ethos" and which "aims ultimately at effecting in others a judgment and decision with a view to action" (144). As Aristotle says early in Book I of the Rhetoric: "Most of the things about which we make decisions, and into which therefore we inquire, present us with alternative possibilities. For it is about our actions that we deliberate and inquire, and all our actions have a contingent character" (155). From such

statements Grimaldi reaches the conclusion that Aristotle's rhetoric is a blueprint for understanding the complex and social nature of human discourse rather than a recipe for wielding verbal influence. Critics such as John Gage and Gregory Clark have similarly argued for an expanded understanding of Aristotle that moves the goal of rhetoric beyond simple persuasion to "the discovery of knowledge" among parties (Gage 155).

Despite the claims for dialogism in Aristotle, the ambiguous nature of the Rhetoric remains. I agree with Arthur Walzer's assertion that much of Aristotle's acknowledgement of the importance of audience results in a monologic, not dialogic, scheme.<sup>3</sup> In Aristotle's configuration, the audience exists less as an entity with which the rhetor builds knowledge and more as a factor that must be known in order to better induce a correct judgment in that audience. In the Rhetoric, there are many such statements as the following, which are difficult not to read as manipulative: "People always think well of speeches adapted to, and reflecting, their own character: and we can now see how to compose our speeches so as to adapt both them and ourselves to our audiences" (177). And, in the end, that the audience can be known, in a somewhat transparent way, is a key feature of both Aristotle's and Bruffee's rhetoric. Aristotle catalogues the psychologies of various "types" without adequately accounting for the overdetermination of subjectivities: "Wealthy men are ignorant and arrogant" (178), etc. Thus, if one is, say, a firefighter, one thinks a particular, identifiable way.

An analogous line of reasoning underlies Bruffee's

understanding of community, which he then uses to bolster his academic discourse argument. As he puts it, "In most cases people write in business, government, and the professions mainly to inform and convince other people within the writer's own community, *people whose status and assumptions approximate the writer's own*" [emphasis added] ("Conversation" 89) . Explaining Rorty's idea of normal discourse, defined as a "conversation within a community of knowledgeable peers" (89), Bruffee goes on to say that "A community of knowledgeable peers is a group of people who accept, and whose work is guided by, the same paradigms and the same code of values and assumptions" (89). Bruffee cites Rorty to explain that a normal discourse community is one where "everyone agrees on the 'set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as a question, what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it'" (89). Compare this with one of Aristotle's statements regarding the enthymeme: "We must not, therefore, start from any and every accepted opinion, but only from . . . those accepted by our judges or by those whose authority they recognize" (184).

Where does such a normalized situation exist? (Surely not in academia. We need only sit in on a department meeting or a holistic grading session to find that consensus is a rare thing.) Indeed consensus quite often results from mediated concessions: we don't necessarily agree but we are willing to accept certain positions for utilitarian and political reasons. Both Bruffee and Rorty allow for dissensus in these communities via the mechanism labeled "abnormal discourse," and Bruffee, in a move that I think

does some violence to language, is willing to define consensus as the agreement to disagree. (In my view, setting students the small-group goal of investigating a question need not be the same thing as working towards consensus.) But I find that his idea of community and the notion of audience derived from it undermine the potential of a collaborative model that claims to be about conversation. This is not to say that people don't share assumptions, but Bruffee and Rorty rely on an understanding of cultural affinities to produce the conclusion that people and discourses can be classified and grouped in a too pat manner. Perhaps it is well to remember Walter Ong's analysis that the audience is always a fiction, always the writer's construction. And this is true because the audience is always, at least in part, unknowable.

Community too, in this sense, is always a fiction, one which can become troublesome when a pedagogy is based on asking or requiring students to join it. It is the fictive nature of community, or what Joseph Harris terms its literally "nowhere" quality, that is central to an understanding of kitsch. For when we posit a unified, knowable community or discourse, little room is left for the idiosyncratic, which must be subsumed in order to preserve the idyll of the knowable community. It is not incidental to Bruffee's vision of community that his writing style is filled with dogmatic, coercive assertions about what we must and should do:

The inference writing teachers *should* make . . . is that our task *must* involve engaging students in conversation among themselves at as many points in

both the writing and the reading process as possible, and that we *should* contrive to ensure that students' conversation about what they read and write is similar in as many ways as possible to the way we would like them eventually to read and write. The way they talk to each other *determines* the way they will think and the way they will write. [emphasis added] ("Conversation" 89)

Bruffee's is not an invitation to dialogic conversation but (with a certain post-War, Eastern European flavor) a carefully controlled attempt to indoctrinate students into a fictive community--the circle of consensus that Kundera describes despairingly. In his critique of the early Bruffee's collaborative learning, Donald C. Stewart complains "that this movement fails to recognize its inherent groupiness" (110). Identifying collaborative learning as a direct offshoot of social constructionism, he further asserts

Social constructionism emphasizes human cooperation because it asserts that humans acquire their identities from groups and that their knowledge is a product of belief. But if individualism has its excesses, so can social constructionism: the police state, the group mentality to the point at which it eliminates "non-social" types such as the Jews in Nazi Germany. (108)

Stewart's criticism of Bruffee in places is over the top, such as his objection to the use of the word "collaboration" because of its World War II connotations (103). But nonetheless, despite this and Stewart's own embrace of an equally problematic expressivist individualism, he points to

a difficulty that emerges when we favor community-based models of composing that rely on the joy of consensus and the attendant normative nature of that consensus. Such consensus is fundamental to the production of kitsch--that idyllic art that "suggests a serene and homogeneous world"--and a well-run classroom.

If the communal is a fundamental element of kitsch, then romantic conceptions of authorship that emphasize individual difference, such as expressivism, might prove the antidote. I would suggest, however, that this is not the case because the construction of self on which expressivism relies is largely itself one of kitsch. Indeed expressivism and collaborativism, as well as other theories of composing, rely on a model of intellectual and moral development that cannot help but lend itself to a kitsch aesthetic. Bruffee writes, "When we work maturely and at our best, do we not work to please those we want to please, which usually, but seldom exclusively, includes ourselves?"[emphasis added] ("Way Out" 462), and, in 1999, "mature, effective interdependence--social maturity integrated with intellectual maturity--is the most important lesson we should expect students to learn" (Collaborative xiii). The moralising tone of these sentences is exemplary of the "bold moral and civic claims" (Newkirk 70) composition often lays out as its mission and *raison d'être*. In so writing, Bruffee reveals the underlying themes of accommodation and self-actualization that, as I discussed in Chapter One, characterize much of composition, and which, albeit with noble intentions, hinge on the policing of subjectivity and knowledge. Bruffee's "maturely" and "best" gesture towards the middle class values of industry,

reasonableness and earnest politeness that Lynn Bloom ("Middleclass") has identified as the "enterprise" of Freshman Comp. The connection between middle class subjectivity and kitsch is complex and is one I will return to, but for now I note the containment function that the cultivation of such subjectivity shares with kitsch to avoid the "complex, painful realities" (Lugg 106) of competing discourses.

The inculcation of this middle class sensibility and the stress on self-actualization is as much, if not more so, in evidence in expressivist pedagogies that emphasize narratives of individuality. Lester Faigley, for example, shows skepticism towards what is a powerful justification for such pedagogies--the notion that in writing a student will "lay claim to the self he is becoming" (127). In his analysis of personal narratives in Coles's and Vopat's What Makes Writing Good, a collection of "best" student writing, Faigley observes the following:

The teachers' commentaries on the narratives of past experience imply that success in teaching depends on making a student aware of the desired subject position she will occupy. Wayne Booth's student, Michael Fitzgerald, says of himself: "I know I have a long way to go, but I want to get there" (292), and Booth ends his comment with the sentence: "He is on his way"(297). But where is he going? It is this notion of the student writer as a developing rational consciousness that makes most talk of empowerment so confused. . . . what is very little explored in the teachers' commentaries on

the narratives is the institutional setting of student writing about the self and how that setting is implicated in the production of "honest" and "truthful" writing. (129)

In this last sentence Faigley gestures in the direction of kitsch--towards not only Flavell's description of a politicized aesthetic of idyllic art that promotes uncritical community but also towards Celebonovic's characterization of kitsch as "bourgeois realism." What Faigley finds suspicious in the construction of truth and honesty might be understood generically in terms of the idyll of development; the *Bildung* of the bourgeois narrative of self-actualization that encourages a subjectivity of reflection. This reflective mode has been identified by critics as characteristic of the essay genre with its trope of observing self-consciousness.<sup>4</sup> As O.B. Hardison puts it in "Binding Proteus: An Essay on the Essay," the "self-fashioning" nature of the genre is based on "a consciousness real-izing itself" (26). Faigley's point is that the "I" of such narratives is carefully circumscribed to disallow competing discourses, even as it purports to be "honest" and "truthful": "recognizing the sources of contradictory and incompatible discourses in student writing runs squarely against both the expressivist and rationalist traditions of teaching writing" (128). Thus this "I" functions rhetorically in the manner of kitsch to suppress that which is not consistent with a middle class ideal.

What this middle class ideal is and how it functions as a containment strategy in relation to kitsch warrants further elaboration. To do so I will start with Alex Celebonovic's

unusual move of defining kitsch in a non-pejorative way as bourgeois realism: "In the Bourgeois Realist period, art . . . tended to support a certain way of life which was subject to the moral code of the middle classes. . . . artistic works bore witness to the excellence of middle-class morality" (25). His analysis is concerned with the sentimental depictions of nineteenth century Academic painters (often designated as exemplifying kitsch) whose legacy was overtaken and ultimately discredited by the trajectory of modern art. Of the work, Celebonovic states, The subjects treated by . . . (these) painters, no less than the style of their works, show quite unambiguously that their art was completely bound up with the preoccupations of one or more clearly defined social groups. In the course of their daily life, these groups made such a flagrant display of their conception of the world that their moral values became in a very real way the hallmark of the painting they supported. The direction and importance of this painting was therefore closely linked to its social role; and it is not difficult to understand why it was so highly appreciated by the people of the time, for it provided them with a clearly recognizable picture of themselves. (13)

This "recognizable picture" is a flattering one and linked to kitsch as I have been discussing it. The Bourgeois Realist movement "set out . . . to interpret visible and palpable reality, with the firm intention of adapting it to the ideal image conditioning public and private life" (Celebonovic 46). Many of the works in question are sentimental depictions of

family life, exotic orientalist themes, or nostalgic mythological narratives. Their treatment is skillfully realistic at the same time that it is conditioned by a desire to render such realism in accordance with middle class ideology. Bourgeois Realism, as Celebonovic describes it, attempts to deny that which is inconsistent with the middle class ideal.

Celebonovic's idea that kitsch upholds middle class values in a mirror-like fashion resonates with Faigley's criticisms of expressivist composing theories and pedagogies. In his critique of What Makes Writing Good, Faigley singles out one student's carefully measured, nostalgic essay about writing letters home from Paris. "From Vivaldi at Notre Dame to the value of writing," asserts Faigley, "the truths 'exposed' and 'revealed' in the essay are a series of recognitions for a college English teacher" (125). Or, put another way, the essay conforms to middle class "teachers' unstated assumptions about subjectivity" (128). This subjectivity often involves "characterizing former selves as objects for analysis" (129), a move that is, in general, consistent with the personal essay and an often-cited reason for its value in the college writing class.<sup>5</sup> Proponents see the personal essay as a means of developing consciousness, but what type of consciousness? Indeed, as Joel Haefner maintains, the very construction of the self on which the essay is based can be understood as a product of bourgeois liberalism. We see this quite clearly when O.B. Hardison invokes the tending of a garden as a metaphor for essay writing and the cultivation of consciousness. Such a comparison underscores the middle class aesthetic associated

with gardening where one has the time and leisure to devote to the nurturing of beauty. In this sense, essay writing may be understood as an inherently bourgeois practice, compelling a subjectivity given to passive self-reflection that ends in solipsism.<sup>6</sup> But paradoxically, the expressivist self of essay writing, ostensibly steeped in the idiosyncratic vision of the individual, can, as I point out earlier in my reference to Faigley's analysis, be understood as an ideologically discursive and generic construction.

The wistful tone characteristic of the personal essay, where often "former selves" are "objects for analysis," is indicative of a particular aspect of the kitsch aesthetic and its connection to loss. In order to understand this relationship and its applicability to the writing classroom, I rely on the theorization of Celeste Olalquiaga, whose view of kitsch further complicates the communal/political one that I have discussed thus far. Olalquiaga's study of kitsch as a nineteenth century western development relies on Benjamin's understanding of commodity fetishism and the relationship among authenticity, reproduction, collection, and voyeurism (see note 2). Thus "Kitsch is these scattered fragments of the aura, traces of dream images turned loose from their matrix, multiplied by the incessant beat of industrialization, covering the emptiness left by both the aura's demise and modernity's failure to deliver its promise of a radiant future" (84). Like Kundera, she invokes the idyll in her explanation of the appeal of kitsch. In the realm of kitsch,

there reigns an illusion of completeness, a universe devoid of past and future, a moment whose

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

What is of particular interest to me for the purposes of understanding the aesthetics of the writing classroom is Olalquiaga's discussion of the idea of the souvenir, in which she problematizes the concept of the idyll. Here Olalquiaga makes a distinction between two kinds of kitsch: melancholic and nostalgic. Both, I believe, have bearing on composition practices and are linked to issues of class values. The merit of Olalquiaga's analysis is in its extension of kitsch beyond the modernist idea of "fake art" to account for a broader, more complicated spectrum of the phenomenon. This treatment, in turn, is useful in accounting for the inadequacy of expressivist paradigms to confront kitsch. I suggest that the two types of kitsch that Olalquiaga identifies--nostalgic and melancholic-- are both present in writing instruction and, further, that students often write in the former to be countered by the teacher's interest in the latter, although, as I will further demonstrate, the distinction is not always so clear cut.

According to Olalquiaga, nostalgic and melancholic kitsch both have a connection to memory and loss/death, but nostalgic kitsch is based on the erasure of loss/death while melancholic kitsch fetishizes it. In her words, "Melancholic kitsch revels in memories because their feeling of loss nurtures its underlying rootlessness. Nostalgic kitsch

evokes memories in order to dispel any such feelings" (296). The nostalgic variety also "yearns after an experience whose lack is precisely glossed over by the desire for a utopian origin, producing a perfect memory of something that never really happened" (293). Nostalgic kitsch is perhaps what we are most familiar with and certainly, it would seem, the sort of kitsch referenced in relation to political manipulation and the masses. Nostalgic kitsch creates feelings of belonging through clichés that deny loss or imperfections. According to this schema, the kitsch of the plastic flower bouquet or the fluffy kitten greeting card lies in its defiance of decay and its erasure of the accompanying loss and disorder. Melancholic kitsch does precisely the opposite: it romanticizes and essentializes that loss, as in a coming of age/loss of innocence tale, for example.

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

(122).

This last statement is evocative of the personal essay as Faigley and others describe it with its melancholic, bittersweet "truths" and "revelations" and often ironic, controlled emotional responses. And this is the type of personal writing frequently cited as "mature." But often student writing does not exhibit this type of "maturity." To the dissatisfaction of many writing teachers, students frequently provide personal accounts that are judged as sentimental and overly-generalized. Rather than *melancholic kitsch*, student narration of personal experience, much to the consternation of instructors who are looking for something "deeper," may contain platitudes and optimistic clichés typical of *nostalgic kitsch*. David Bartholomae ("Inventing") and Thomas Newkirk have discussed encountering the "problem" of unsophisticated emotion, cliché, and "commonplaces" in student writing and the need for adjustment. While Bartholomae sees deficit--lack of critical thinking--in students' "common sense," Newkirk attempts a more empathetic reading of such writing. Newkirk attributes the disjunct between teacher and student expectations to a variety of causes, ranging from what he sees as Aristotle's deprecation of emotion to literary modernism's elevation of irony. He even acknowledges, citing Bourdieu's theories of taste, the connection between class and aesthetics, suggesting that "discomfort with emotional appeals is a feature of the 'aesthetic disposition' assumed by those who belong (or seek to belong) to a cultural aristocracy" (27) with writing teachers being part of that milieu.

Building on Newkirk's distinction, I am suggesting that

the more sophisticated handling of emotion is no less kitsch than the unsophisticated "common sense" deplored in some student writing. The sophisticated kitsch preferred by teachers is melancholic in nature and perhaps more typical of bourgeois sensibilities. The nostalgic kitsch of the student narratives, rather than merely symptomatic of "immaturity" (which can only apply presumably when we are talking about young adults anyhow), may instead be part of a non-elite aesthetic. The cultural values of each group are reflected, respectively, in the realism of the two types of kitsch, similar to the way the academic painting of the nineteenth century reflected, in Celebonovic's view, middle class ideals. To explore this distinction further, I describe below student responses to two works of fiction that appear in a textbook used typically in freshman literature classes. Student reception of these two stories will illustrate the conflict between melancholic and nostalgic kitsch as well as the middle class aesthetic in operation in the freshman writing sequence.

In the Bedford Introduction to Literature, edited by Michael Meyer, an invidious comparison is set up between two works of fiction: an excerpt from a romance novel, A Secret Sorrow, by Karen Vanderzee and a more "literary" short story, "A Sorrowful Woman," by Gail Godwin. The chapters from the novel describe the dilemma of a woman, Faye, who has an internal injury that affects her fertility. She breaks off her relationship with the man she loves because she knows he wants to have children. She doesn't tell him her reason, but he figures it out and tells her that he still loves her and that they can adopt children. By contrast the Gail Godwin

story describes an un-named woman whose perfect life-- understanding husband, beautiful child, comfortable home-- causes her to have angst and commit suicide. Comparing the two works of fiction is meant to elicit a distinction between literary and formulaic fiction. The editor attempts to accomplish this through an introduction that grapples with the difference between the two genres and a series of questions that ostensibly helps illustrate this difference as it plays out in the two examples.

While Meyer tries hard not to come across as a snob, paying lip service to the legitimate "entertainment" function of formula fiction, the point of the exercise is clearly to steer students' tastes away from the romance novel to the short story by convincing them of the artistic merit of the latter. While Meyer begins with a neutral enough question: "Describe what you found appealing in each story," he moves to other questions that tip his hand: "How is the woman's problem in "A Sorrowful Woman" made more complex than Faye's in A Secret Sorrow, and, "Can both stories be read a second or third time and still be interesting? Why or why not?" Meyer goes to lengths to establish the formulaic, and thereby banal, nature of the romance novel, reprinting the Harlequin style sheet as evidence of its prefabrication.

That A Secret Sorrow is formulaic is true enough. That it is kitsch is true enough, too. It certainly seems to conform to the fake art idea where a happy ending inspires sugary sentiments devoid of complexity. Politically and socially, the formula supports a conservative ideology in its portrait of a happily married wife and mother. The Harlequin romance as a genre has all the features of a kind of neo-

right-wing social realism. With its neat resolution as an effacement of loss and death, these novels can be located in the camp of nostalgic kitsch as described above. But while the romance is kitsch, so too, I would argue, is the story that Michael Meyer identifies as literary. Meyer sees fit to ignore the generic features of Godwin's story, focusing instead on its "complexity" as a key component of its literariness. But the "complexity" may be seen as part of the formula that underlies what Meyer and others are calling "literary." While the formula for the romance novel is understandable from the perspective of nostalgic kitsch, the "complexity" of the literary short story may be explained in terms of a melancholic kitsch that revels in feelings of existential loss. While both stories, then, constitute kitsch, the "literary" story, in its melancholic kitsch, is part of an elite aesthetic that often becomes privileged in freshman writing and literature classes.

The melancholic tone is evidenced in the opening lines of Godwin's "A Sorrowful Woman":

One winter evening she looked at them: the husband durable, receptive, gentle; the child a tender golden three. The sight of them made her so sad and sick she did not want to see them ever again.

(Meyer 30)

The story then proceeds to chart the woman's withdrawal from the roles of wife and mother, which culminates in the image of her suicide:

"Look, Mommy is sleeping," said the boy. "She's tired from doing all our things again." He dawdled in a stream of the last sun for that day and

watched his father roll tenderly back her eyelids, lay his ear softly to her breast, test the delicate bones of her wrist. The father put down his face into her fresh-washed hair. (34)

Using these passages as points of interrogation, I ask the question: what is the nature of the "complexity" that is being lauded by Meyer? The picture here is after all melodramatic, but perhaps no less appealing for that. The lyricism of the opening paragraph is connected immediately to loss that is sustained throughout the narrative as Godwin explores the nature of the *ennui* that afflicts the character. It is this relationship to loss, as defined by Olalquiaga, that marks the story as melancholic kitsch. For while the nostalgic kitsch of the romance novel resolves and eliminates loss in its unbearably happy ending, Godwin's story crystallizes that loss in its unhappy one. The aestheticized/fetishized loss (essentially romantic in nature) is, I would argue, fundamental to the design of the story's "complexity."

While I too prefer Godwin's story to the Harlequin novel--that is to say, I prefer the sentimentalization of loss to the sentimentalization of wifedom and motherhood--I have found that many students do not. The elite aesthetic may privilege loss, but students often prefer the nostalgic to the melancholic. A Bartholomaen "developmental" explanation would suggest that such students need to be disabused of their "commonplace" notions as they enter into university discourse. But when I consider the responses students give to the question: which story do you like better? the scenario becomes complicated by issues of class

and gender. Often students who prefer the romance novel, usually women (who are, after all, the target audience), identify with how terrible the heroine must feel about not being able to have children. They are impressed with and envious of the understanding husband who loves her anyway. In short, they find the stability of the couple's life gratifying, often remarking how wonderful it would be to find such a man.

While it galls me that these women so readily accept the definition of woman as wife and mother prescribed by the novel, I wonder too if this acceptance isn't understandable and functional within the context of working class lives. The romance novel depicts an idealized portrait of middle class life that can be appealing to those who do not have, yet aspire to, that status (or, as Celebonovic suggests with regard to bourgeois realism, accept that status uncritically). Such a reading of student response is suggested by the bewilderment that the same students often express over the Godwin story. While the character's angst may be immediately recognizable for the middle class feminist who can afford to deconstruct middle class ideals, my working class students have often been merely baffled by the woman's behavior. How on earth could she be unhappy when she has a wonderful husband, a beautiful child, a lovely home and apparently no financial worries to speak of? Why would anybody in such circumstances want to kill herself? And why would anybody want to read such a story or find it interesting?

Of course Godwin's story is precisely an exploration of those questions, and it is instructive to think about the

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

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

house for us in the same way that cliché can be for our students. (234)

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

But is it accurate to say that teachers do in general prefer "multiple meanings" and "critical thought," and to what extent does this elitist or literary aesthetic coincide with a "middle class sensibility"? "Middle class" and "bourgeois," severed from their material moorings, become slippery terms, and in this discussion of taste and aesthetics, the designations of "high/middle/low brow" may be more appropriate or useful. But the contradictory connotations of the term bourgeois are, I think, relevant to a discussion of an elitist aesthetic or the question of "taste." Immanuel Wallerstein, for example, in his discussion of the evolving concepts of the bourgeoisie and the middle classes, points out that the bourgeois lifestyle has historically been associated with "aristocratic"<sup>7</sup> tastes, while at the same time connected to "a certain absence of true luxury and a certain awkwardness of social behavior":

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

Where do middle class college writing instructors fall on this divide of bourgeois versus artist/intellectual? Perhaps it is safe to say they have their sympathies in both camps. And what about students, especially those of working class background, who may be encountering academic culture for the first time and be in a process of embourgeoisement? These ambiguities have bearing on what counts as "good writing" in the college classroom and, consequently, the goal of subjectivity engendered there. As I shall suggest, the conflicts these ambiguities produce can be re-conceptualized in terms of the polarities of nostalgia and melancholy.

But for now, as a starting point of analysis, I turn to Lynn Bloom's characterization of what she asserts are middle class values and their relevance to freshman composition. Bloom lists what she argues are historically characteristics of the American middle classes: respectability, decorum/propriety, moderation/temperance, thrift, efficiency, order, cleanliness, punctuality, delayed gratification, and critical thinking. She suggests that such middle class features saturate writing theory and pedagogy and are based in American eighteenth and nineteenth century rhetorical and social practices. While this battery of adjectives certainly seems suggestive of the bourgeois emphasis on industry (excluding, maybe, the nebulous "critical thinking"), still I wonder to what extent these characteristics are indeed "middle class" or exclusively so given the complexity, as I outlined above, of what constitutes middle class culture. Some of the features mentioned seem inconsistent with the hedonism and aristocratic dimensions of contemporary middle class life that Wallerstein identifies. And to my mind many

of Bloom's categories characterize equally well values associated with the stable working class. Indeed I wonder if these stated qualities are not more accurately viewed as the values the American middle classes desire the working classes to possess to ensure the latter's usefulness.

The term "critical thinking" strikes a note of intellectualism in Bloom's litany that otherwise has a moralistic flavor. Here I return to my earlier question about Skorczewski's observation that teachers (presumably middle class in their orientation) have a penchant for "critical thought." What is the nature of this "critical thought" and is it connected to a class perspective? Critical thinking seems inconsistent with the other virtues Bloom outlines as middle class. In the context of Bloom's list, I can't help but question the nature of a "critical thinking" that is undergirded by concerns such as propriety, temperance, and thrift. Just how critical, I wonder, could such thinking be, and where is the room for entertaining the "multiple meanings" Skorczewski speaks of? In fact the schema that Bloom identifies sounds more like a prescription for sticking to a straight and narrow that would exclude a wide range of inquiry. I don't disagree that her list is descriptive, at least in part, of the Freshman Comp enterprise, but to accept Bloom's description of puritanical middle class values would be to ignore the aristocratic and intellectual aspects of the middle class. What is important for my discussion here is that her view of the nature and purpose of the composition class would place it in the realm of nostalgic kitsch rather than the melancholic kitsch that I have associated with an elitist aesthetic of complexity.

Again, this ambiguity is important to identifying what aesthetics reign in the writing class.

It may be more accurate to depict the first year writing course as being caught somewhere between the two types of kitsch, the vacillation attributable in part to the complexities of social class perspectives, as I've suggested above, and also to composition's abiding concern with subjectivity and development. In the case of the latter factor, the collapsing of the distance between text and writer matters. For it is easy enough to celebrate loss and irony in a text we consider literary and impersonal but far more difficult to rail against sentimentality in a text we read as a representation of a student's life. Further, as Bloom identifies, composition promotes the production of texts that mirror the values it seeks to inculcate in its students. Thus instructors, whose sensibilities are located in the competing discourses of middle class aesthetics, might have a soft spot for writing that reveals an aesthetic of earnest industriousness even as they are disappointed in its "commonplaces" that lack complexity and ambiguity. And, conversely, an English professor might find rebelliousness and irreverence interesting in literature while taking a dim view of these same qualities when they show up in student work (and, even more so, in behavior, for that matter). Local context is important here also. Expectations and levels of tolerance will no doubt vary from institution to institution and may be tied to issues of class. That is to say there may be more emphasis on Bloom's laundry list of so-called middle class values at institutions where the middle class status of students cannot be taken for granted or where

such values appeal to working class expectations of embourgeoisement.

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

At the college in question, the English department mandates what is not an unusual gatekeeping measure: a common exit exam in the form of a timed essay, holistically scored, at the end of the semester for all its first-year composition courses. The exam counts for fifty percent of the student's final grade. Instructors, who are required to participate in grading exams other than their own students, are "normed" with sample student essays. What I reprint here are two essays from a norming packet that represent an "A" and a "C" grade, respectively. In the packet the essays are accompanied by rationale for the assigned grade. While these rationales couch their critiques in craft-based issues of development, organization, and style, I contend that they also illustrate Bloom's thesis about the normative, and what

she calls middle class, nature of freshman composition. Consequently, the essays illustrate the tensions between melancholic and nostalgic kitsch as these two aesthetics interweave themselves in the ideological landscape of the writing classroom.

#### *The "A" essay*

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

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

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

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

either. When Joey Levick was found he was pronounced dead. However, the death came about as a result of his inability to lift his head out of the ditch which caused him to suffocate. If anyone were there to help him lift his head, he would have survived, the physicians declared. In spite of being informed of what had occurred people did not react. I recall Joey's mother saying in tears "They are monsters. They let my son die just because they didn't want to get involved."

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

#### The "C" essay

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

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

Though I can comprehend her view I can't agree. My reasons are as follows; In a situation where a stranger approaches you for help you only seconds to decide if you are going to help or turn away. My first instinct is to help and

the next moment say "wait, asses the situation. Take a moment and ask for more information on their situation. Look for clues to see if their plea is legitimate. Use common sense! For example a plea to use your phone is bull. "Heres a quarter or call collect," works for me.

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

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

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

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

As a teacher of the freshman composition course at this college, I try to help students understand the grading of the final exam by showing them these two essays and asking them to guess the grade that each received. I also ask students to say which one they liked better and why. While some students unequivocally like the "A" paper, it is not uncommon

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

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

- *The writer orients the reader by referencing the Quindlen article being analyzed.*
- *The writer briefly states and discusses one of the main*

*ideas in the article.*

- *The writer presents a thesis-centered essay that focuses on the issue of "individualism in modern society."*
- *The ideas are nicely organized into paragraphs which have topic sentences that are developed.*
- *The writer uses examples from the text and from personal resources to support the thesis.*
- *The writer moves smoothly from the general to the specific, and the ideas seem to follow a logical development.*
- *Ideas are presented fluently in sentences that are varied and linked with transitions. The vocabulary is well suited to the topic and there is a good command of grammar and general mechanics (punctuation and spelling), despite a few problems with punctuation, word choice, and word omissions.*

*The grade is C.*

- *The essay gets off to a good start as the writer attempts to orient the reader by referring to the Quindlen article, but the discussion of the text is too brief.*
- *There seems to be a passionate voice in the essay.*
- *Even though a thesis is not stated clearly, the essay focuses on a main idea.*
- *The writer uses examples to support a position.*
- *The paper becomes weak as the writer makes unsubstantiated generalizations.*
- *The language is uneven, lapsing into informal/conversational speech.*
- *As the essay progresses, there are increasing problems with mechanics (spelling, punctuation).*

What I find most striking in the "A" paper is its *indirectness*, the way it beats around the bush, in contrast to the "in-your-face" quality of the "C" essay. This indirectness probably accounts for why I have difficulty sticking with the "A" paper, but it is also responsible for the sense of decorum that pervades the piece. Indeed in the rationale that accompanies the essays in the grading packet, the "A" essay is praised for the way it "moves smoothly" and is "nicely organized" and uses "well-suited" vocabulary [emphasis added]. The measured tone of the "A" paper, then, is in direct contrast to the aggressiveness of the "C" paper, which is described in the rationale as "passionate," a term that has historically been connected with descriptions of mob activity and the "lower orders." The "C" essay is also denigrated for "lapsing into informal/conversational speech," which is, I think, a key component of said "passion." In short, the writer of the "C" essay does not dance the slow, elaborate dance of the "A" essay. The "C" essay says what it has to say with an abruptness that is unpalatable, even impolite, from the perspective of the grading committee. Certainly the very first paragraph of that essay, with its reference to America's involvement in World War II, has a pithy, "what more is there to say?" quality to it. And this economy almost ends the essay before it has a chance to begin, a fatal error in the realm of the timed essay exam.

While there are clearly more surface errors in the "C" essay (which may be a bigger part of its "C"-ness than the grading committee is willing to let on), I wonder how much more substantive the "A" essay is. Does it contain those "complexities" and "ambiguities" that writing teachers

purportedly like to see? Really, it does not. Its message (and that does seem to be the right term to use) is a simple condemnation of an ethic of self-interest. There are few areas of gray in the moral schema that the essay outlines. Interestingly, the "C" essay seems to grapple with the question in a more complex way, attempting a position of mediation between self-interest and social responsibility. And while the "C" essay in the grading criteria is accused of making "unsubstantiated generalizations," it's clear that the "A" essay makes its share of the same. The statements, "as a result of such indifference victims are falling everyday" and "cases such as these occur everyday" and "individualism has lead to a pluralistic society in which everyone cares only for themselves" serve their purpose within the context of the "A" writer's argument (in effect they constitute the argument), yet how well these assertions would bear up under scrutiny is doubtful.

My point here is not to criticize the writer (who has performed admirably in the hour and half time period given to write the essay) but rather to understand the grading criteria and the underlying values. While the "A" essay is praised for its elaboration, the "C" essay is penalized for its reliance on unstated assumptions about the reader's ability to connect the dots, a feature Ong would associate with orality or, in this case, as the grading committee observed, the "conversational" quality of the writer's language. Newkirk has observed a similar reluctance on the part of his students to expatiate in accordance with teacher's expectations. He finds that other students, on hearing their classmates' texts, often don't have the same

problem with missing details that the instructor has. I offer his comments on student minimalism:

I speculate that students are often readier to elaborate from their own experiences, to fill in gaps; they sometimes resist the call for a greater density of detail by saying it bogs the paper down and doesn't leave enough room for the reader's imagination. (33)

Newkirk is sympathetic to this alternative student aesthetic, which he sees as a developmental issue related to his students' youth.

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

achieved some degree of success in this reliance on "common sense."

Is essay "A" being rewarded for its appeal to middle class sensibilities and is essay "C" being penalized for its failure to transcend a restricted working class code? I am in part suggesting this possibility, but I also find the situation more complex than that simple dichotomy. Certainly the charge made against the "C" essay of "unsubstantiated generalizations" points to a dissatisfaction with the restricted code of "common sense" that constitutes the writer's major rhetorical strategy. It is a strategy that smacks of the cliché and makes teachers wince. Likewise it is the strategy of nostalgic kitsch that relies on uninterrogated consensus and effacement of loss as the essay offers up its pragmatic, optimistic solution of compromise. And yet, as I pointed out, this compromise contains a level of the lauded "complexity" that is missing from the other essay. Despite the "A" essay's elaboration, it does not demonstrate the level of problematizing that we might expect to see validated by middle class intellectualism. The simple moral drawn from the 20/20 story, for example, that someone should have gotten involved and pulled Joey Levick from the ditch ignores the "problem" of how he got into the ditch in the first place; alcohol abuse and unchecked violence (and no doubt poverty) are a big part of the Joey Levick story and certainly societal problems worthy of note. To conclude that the tale is an example of America's problem with individualism is the sort of simplification that nostalgic kitsch (like timed essay exams) elicits.

Applying Bloom's middle class criteria also points to

contradictions. The "A" essay would seem to violate, for example, the values of thrift and efficiency in its use of language while the "C" essay epitomizes said virtues. Although "A" rates high in the "decorum and propriety" category while "C" is down right rude, "C" in some ways appears to do better with the "moderation" criteria than "A" in as much as "C" takes a more temperate position on the issue of getting involved. What "A" does have in abundance is the wistful tone of melancholic kitsch that embodies loss. This is evident throughout essay "A," in its concluding "no man is an island" and especially in its lament over the loss of the idyll:

*Traditional ethics, which implied duties of one human being towards another have been replaced with the "New Morality". The new set of ethics is emerging in society today, which in its foundation has an impenetrable individualism.*

The difference in tones of course between the two essays is very notable, and it's tempting to conclude that essay "A" is being rewarded for its sense of melancholy that appeals to elitist tastes. But it is not only melancholy that is present here. The sense of deference so evident in "A" is notably lacking in "C." I think it is worthwhile to speculate on the place of such deference, not only in college writing courses in general, but particularly in the non-elite community college. Bloom notes how teachers expect student writing "to reflect subordination appropriate to the normative student-teacher relationship" ("Middleclass" 660). Is this expectation exacerbated in non-elite institutions where the student population is largely working class and

minority? At such institutions are teachers particularly pleased by students who write essays "smoothly" and "nicely" because such writing is evidence of the success of the community college's civilizing mission? And conversely, under these circumstances, are teachers particularly offended by displays of "passion" of the unteachable unwashed who violate bourgeois notions of politeness? The complicated, ambiguous nature of middle class culture might present something of a conundrum to working class students on the outside looking in. What will their middle class teacher's appreciate? The romanticized "passion" of the non-elite that might appeal to the artist/intellectual or the bourgeois politeness of the "smooth" and "nice"? Which aspect of middle class culture to emulate? What to do?

Such factors complicate the dialectic of nostalgic and melancholic kitsch that I see operating in writing instruction so that the case is not simply a face-off between teachers' melancholy and students' nostalgia, although that may sometimes be in evidence. Unlike the study of literature where the aesthetic difference can afford to be more clear cut, writing instruction is complicated by a preoccupation with subjectivity and a conflation of writing style with personality. Thus teachers might teach a literary aesthetic of melancholic kitsch even as they demand the nostalgic variety in student writing as demonstration of compliant subjectivity. Until they actually get it. Then, as we have seen, teacher's are likely to complain of clichés and commonplaces. The moral and ethical dimensions of responding to student work place writing instruction at the crossroads of kitsch, which perhaps becomes especially true when we

enter the realm of student autobiographical writing or writing that attempts or purports to represent incidents from a student's life. To understand the way teacher concern with student subjectivity and development fosters kitsch in this type of writing, I look now at a student essay selected by Robert Connors that he deemed particularly problematic. Connors's and others' responses to this student work show a trajectory of kitsch as instructors struggle to place and render comprehensible the life writing of students.

In "Teaching and Learning as a Man," Robert Connors discusses the possibility of conceiving of student writing in terms of gendered genres, particularly with regard to the kind of writing that teachers often receive from young men, such as "the wise elder story, the big challenge story, the I-learned-a-lesson story, and the different quest and journey narratives . . . that teachers see again and again" (150). Connors suggests that, rather than being dismissive of the clichés in such narratives, we learn to understand the significance of such genres to the development of cultural masculinity and allow this understanding to shape our responses to these texts. In the course of his discussion, he reproduces a student essay by which he is, to use his word, "amazed" (151) along with the instructor's response. Connors's point in this case is that composition's obligations to male students go beyond the "craft-based pedagogy" that, as I discussed in Chapter One, Wendy Bishop identified as a paltry response to personal narrative.

The student essay in question, unapologetically titled, "Horsing Around," recounts an experience of male adolescent bonding in which the gratuitous shooting of first a crow and

then later a horse with a rifle and a shotgun takes place in the context of a beer drinking party. The student narrates the story unrepentantly, with a certain sense of excitement and humor, an example of camaraderie that developed as a result of a shared anxiety over possibly being "found out." The account, as Dan Morgan might have it (see Chapter One), "disturbingly lacked remorse" (318) about the pointless cruelty that the boys in the story demonstrated. Connors asks, "How do we reconcile the intelligence and sophistication of some of the writing with this garrulous and self-satisfied tale of puerile cruelty? What are we to say to this student?" (153)

The teacher's evident response, Connors implies, was inadequate. Based on the comment that appears on the final draft ("Your theme is better expressed in this draft than in the earlier one" [153]), Connors infers that the student was told "to provide a 'theme,' in this case some sort of adult regret, that would transform the purity of the narrative into the teacher-favorite narrative genre of 'I did bad and learned a lesson" (153). I'm thankful for Connors's interpretation here, because I would not have guessed, based on my own reading of the paper, that regret was indeed the unspecified "theme" that the teacher's remarks reference. I assume Connors comes to his reading based on what the student managed to add as a last paragraph to the otherwise unrepentant narrative:

Looking back now, the whole thing seems pretty funny, but I also regret it. I feel bad about hurting the horse and I think the incident probably wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for the

combination of boredom, beer, boyhood.

In the parlance of the MFA writing program that I attended, we have an example of an ending that is "unearned." Thomas Newkirk, in his analysis of this essay, notes that "This ending is hardly convincing" and that "One also wonders about the sincerity of the conclusion" (12) given the title "Horsing Around." But Newkirk goes on to say that

the author begins to use some of the expected conventions of the confessional personal narrative. He has constructed two time positions: a self that commits the act, and an older "wiser" self that looks back to judge that action. We are asked to believe that this act of looking back has created a chastened and morally sensitive individual. (12)

Newkirk then adds that "The paradigmatic example of this form of self-presentation is George Orwell's 'Shooting an Elephant,' an essay which bears an eerie resemblance to 'Horsing Around'" (13). In effect Newkirk is acknowledging the generic aspect that Connors takes note of in his remarks that the student seems to have succumbed to the teacherly desire for adult regret.

What Newkirk identifies as a feature of the personal essay genre--a "turn" (13) that acts as a fulcrum to a before and after subject positioning--is suggestive of melancholic kitsch with its obeisance to lyrical loss and irony. If Connors is correct about the theme of regret being elicited by the teacher, then it's possible to view the instructor's response as coming from a sensibility that values the literary aesthetic of melancholy. However, the kitsch desire for a neatly contained "theme" that effaces the unresolved

complexities of "Horsing Around" is perhaps better characterized as nostalgic. The instructor's response, then, appears to be caught somewhere between the two types of kitsch and thus contains elements of both. Although Connors implies criticism of this response, he offers no pat solution to the dilemma. But he does suggest that the student would be better served if the narrative were addressed in terms of its ethical and moral dimensions. Would the response of moral intervention that Connors gestures towards be an improvement, or would it too push the student's work into an uneasy amalgamation of melancholy and nostalgia?

To explore this question, I take up the issue of sincerity raised by both Connors and Newkirk. Is it important to know here whether the student is indeed sincere in his repentance? Or put another way, what occurs if we make the move to conflate life and text and read the essay as a transparent manifestation of the student's moral progress? If the essay, indeed student writing in general, is viewed as an index of emotional growth of the author then the answer is yes, it does matter whether the student has an investment in the regret he professes. But if we focus on the writer in this way, that is, the writer's intentions and motivations as a kind of revisable text, rather than the text of the writing, we may tend to read the writing moralistically, even simplistically, in our efforts to aid the moral development of the student. I am not sure that this is wrong. Connors is convincing within the context of his article that in the case of this essay, craft-based pedagogy constitutes a kind of moral failure; that we owe the student a more engaged response than spouting formalistic jargon about themes and

pointing out error, which is the presumably well-intentioned response the teacher in this case gave. I certainly see Connors's point that an end comment about theme seems extraordinarily anemic in light of this challenging paper.

But I wonder how right-headed it is to subject student texts to a moral barometer--one based on the conflation of life and text and "human development"--that we don't hold literary texts to. For I would argue that it is not the formalistic paradigm per se that fails in this teacher's response and leads to the essay's kitschification. Rather, it is an inaccurate understanding of narrative and of the essay as a genre that mars the instructor's feedback in this case. Specifically, I call into question the concept of "theme" as it appears to be utilized by the student at the teacher's behest and the implied relationship of narrative to example. In so doing, I suggest that the teacher (perhaps inadvertently through the sanctions of what he or she understands the writing teacher's job to be) is relying on a combined aesthetic of both melancholic and nostalgic kitsch that ignores the less predictable ways that narrative and essay function. Consequently, I further suggest that the remedy to this situation is not necessarily the moral intervention that Connors wishes to take, although I don't rule out that possibility, but rather a deployment of the understanding of narrative that is not *limited* to the elements of nostalgic and melancholic kitsch that we see in the teacher response to "Horsing Around." Specifically, I want to invoke and elaborate upon Douglass Hesse's description of narrative, in which he suggests that narrative does not contain points as much as it leads to points. I

believe the difference between these two concepts is crucial to disrupting the paradigm of "story as example" that underlies the teacher's advice and, I would argue, that is interfering with the teacher's reading of the student essay.

Douglass Hesse contests the idea that stories in essays prove or illustrate "points" or theses, although this is the idea we might infer from textbooks. Hesse, after culling sample statements from textbooks on the nature of narrative essays, states:

stories are seen as furnishing evidence for the truth of a proposition. Whether point is extracted from incident or incident is supplied to verify an already-existing point, the two are presented as having an equationlike relationship, with story on one side of the equals sign and point on the other.

(178)

Connors's sample student essay reveals precisely this structure. The story of the shooting party is told and then summed up at the end as a regrettable example of "boredom, beer, boyhood." We might imagine that the student is conforming to an explicit or implicit instruction from teacher or textbook to find the "point" of the story that constitutes a narrative example.

But in Hesse's more elastic view, the story is not the point itself but rather the occasion to make points. In his words,

I am not arguing that we abandon the idea that stories prove points but that we understand proof as rooted in making, the bringing of points into plausible existence. Making a point is not

"balancing the equation." I mean it more literally in the sense of establishing a juncture on the line of words that comprises the essay, a place at which the stating of propositions becomes possible. . . .

(185)

For Hesse, "point" is less a synonym for thesis or theme or kernel of meaning and more literally a place in the narrative space of the essay where assertions can be put forth. The story itself might not "prove" or illustrate anything, but it may provide the structure of an opportunity, even excuse, for the narrator to ruminate. It is worth here noting Hesse's painstaking distinction (which he subsequently--and maddeningly--collapses) between narrative and story. Simply put not all narratives are stories: "Writing a story is a process of attributing order and meaning to events after the fact" (190), which means that the act of telling the story is already an attribution of meaning: the story is imbued with meaning and is not awaiting to be anointed with a theme. The story is the narrative plus exposition. Essays may contain narrative (as distinct from story) or may contain story (with other kinds of exposition distinct from the story) or essays may be stories, where "every word is part of the story; story and essay have a one-to-one correspondence" (182). It is this last category in particular that I believe yields some insight into the student essay in question.

Before turning to that essay, however, I think it is necessary to further review Hesse's explanation of the last mentioned category of "essay as story," in which he invokes Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant." His referencing this piece is lucky because Newkirk, as I indicated earlier, also uses

it to expound his theory of the essay in relation to Connor's sample. Comparing what these two critics see in the shape of Orwell's essay will afford the opportunity to think beyond the moral predicament that Connors sees the student essay creating. I want first to review Newkirk's take on Orwell here, primarily because I think that his analysis is deficient and can be profitably supplemented by Hesse's account of "Shooting an Elephant" using the idea of "essay as story."

Newkirk cites Orwell because he sees his essay as embodying "the turn." I mentioned Newkirk's reference to the generic quality of the "turn" that he identifies as a formal feature in the personal essay and that he sees in operation, in some nascent form, in the student's addition of his closing paragraph. Although Newkirk called this paragraph unconvincing, he in general applauds the effort of students to move, however awkwardly, in this direction. I find it necessary to quote in full Newkirk's description of the "turn" in order to assess its applicability to Orwell's work, Connor's student essay, and to the genre as a whole. Newkirk bullets out the following points:

It (the turn) creates a "before and after" moment that is dramatically satisfying. This was not an understanding arrived at slowly; it is represented as a flash of realization, an epiphany arrived at in a moment of extreme psychological pressure.

It provides thematic weight to the essay. It allows us to consider a major issue, the motives for oppressive action in colonial governments,

through his examination of this "tiny" event.

It illustrates a mind at work, moving from particular to general, making sense of experience. It is therefore a model of learning, an illustration of what John Dewey called "intelligence."

The essay has a confessional urgency. Orwell is "guilty" of a sin that is expiated in the writing. The reader senses a personal need to confess not only to the killing itself, but to racism bred by colonialism. This willingness to reveal something disagreeable enhances Orwell's ethical appeal--here is a man willing to show himself at his worst.

It shows the writer moving to higher moral ground. The early Orwell, young and "poorly educated," plays the role of oppressor without knowing why. The Orwell that emerges from this experience is more conscious of motivation and more capable of opposing the colonialist system. The act of writing the essay itself shows Orwell now to be a formidable opponent of colonialism. (13-14)

When I read Newkirk's list, I find myself attuned to the features of melancholy (the "turn" that embodies lost innocence) and nostalgia (the effacement of ambiguity in the claim to "higher moral ground"). But I also, frankly, find myself wondering if he is talking about the same essay I know. What is the source of these grandiose claims that

Newkirk makes on Orwell's behalf? Formidable opponent of colonialism? Indeed I come away from the essay immersed in the sense of powerlessness that the narrator feels. Hesse's assessment here is instructive and one I share: "Orwell's realization of the oppressor's plight is an event in the story. . . . the horror of 'Shooting an Elephant' is that this realization does not alter the course of events after it. He still pulls the trigger" (187). Rather than being "more capable of opposing the colonialist system" as Newkirk would have it, the Orwell of the story experiences himself vacant of agency. I agree that there has been a "turn," which is to say merely something has happened in the course of this essay, but I find the something far more subtle and less quantifiable than Newkirk makes it out to be. In fact I find Newkirk's crass assertions to miss Orwell's, and perhaps in general the essay genre's, subtlety.

For starters, the perspective that Newkirk talks about does not develop over the course of the essay but rather is infused in it from the beginning. As Orwell indicates in the second paragraph, "at that time I had already made up my mind that imperialism was an evil thing" (1). What's more I question the neat structure of Newkirk's "turn." I see not one but perhaps several turns or points in the story. Presumably Newkirk privileges the one that occurs with the statement: "It was at this moment, as I stood there with the rifle in my hands, that I first grasped the hollowness, the futility of the white man's dominion in the East" (5). But if this is the statement that "matters," what happens to the rest of the story that details Orwell's indecision and impotence? For we could very well say that the important

thing about this essay is not so much Orwell's realization but his inability to change the course of events. Well after his declaration, he relates the following:

The sole thought in my mind was that if anything went wrong those two thousand Burmans would see me pursued, caught, trampled on, and reduced to a grinning corpse like that Indian up the hill. And if that happened it was quite probable that some of them would laugh. That would never do. (6)

His earlier realization does not allow him to alter his thinking or change his actions; certainly this is a "point," of and in, the narrative as important as Newkirk's turn. What too in Newkirk's scheme do we make of the detailed account of Orwell's inability to dispatch the elephant in any efficient and merciful way, or Orwell's parting conclusion that he was "very glad the coolie had been killed" (8) because the death provided legal pretext for his actions? Newkirk's formula reduces such narrative details to filler, but it is precisely such detail that undermines his argument about the narratized Orwell achieving higher moral ground. Indeed it would seem that the Orwell of "Shooting an Elephant" is doing his level best to discredit his moral authority.<sup>8</sup>

In Newkirk's formula, however, this supposed movement to higher moral ground is paralleled by a structural movement from specific to general. I would suggest that Newkirk has this inverted: the structure is precisely the reverse and moves from general to specific. Again my observations coincide with Hesse's: "what is happening is a movement from general to more specific exposition" (183). Rather than the

story being an example of what's wrong with imperialism, as Newkirk suggests, I think the essay moves (perhaps, one could argue, in a conservative fashion) from the abstract political analysis of imperialism towards the narrator's lived experience of that "ism." Ultimately it becomes a tale less about the evils of empire and more about the narrator who tells the story, in much the same way that Heart of Darkness treats Africa as a backdrop for the narration of the individual European. Indeed the narrator's early announcement that he was already decided about the evils of imperialism suggests a certain dissatisfaction with exactly the kinds of pronouncements made by Newkirk. We get a signal here (a turn; a point?) in Orwell's essay that we will be moving in a different direction. The narrator will be, as Hesse would say, "storying readers to propositions" (189) in a shift away from the tradition of rational argument based on abstraction and analysis. (According to Scott Russell Sanders, "Orwell forcefully argued . . . [that] such a bypassing of abstraction, such an insistence on the concrete is a politically subversive act" [33]). This is important because, although Newkirk acknowledges *ethos* in the personal essay, I see an implicit example/theme structure in his analysis that, in its reliance on rational appeal, is essentially logocentric, denying the pathetic and ethical dimensions of the essay's rhetoric. I am suggesting that the story and essay are functioning in a less reductive way than the theme/example mode, or what Newkirk is calling the "turn," would allow for.

Because the essay resists this reduction, it also resists the claims of higher moral ground that Newkirk

attributes to it. As I see it, Newkirk ends up "kitschifying" Orwell's account just as the teacher in Connors's article kitschifies the student essay in calling for a theme. In their simplifications that favor pat structure, both would seem to be moving in the direction of kitsch as Kundera defines it in the elimination of unresolvable complication. But kitsch may be antithetical to the manner in which the essay genre functions. As I mentioned previously, scholarship on the essay often depicts the genre as an open-ended form that defies simplistic structure or neat closure (see note 4). From this perspective, the nature of the essay is anti-kitsch, similar to the way that, according to Kundera, the open-ended, interrogatory nature of the middle-European novel works against a kitsch aesthetic.<sup>9</sup> However, it may be more accurate to depict the essay (and perhaps the novel, too, as Kundera conceives it) as evincing the melancholic kitsch that Olalquiaga identifies. Certainly the undermining of narrative authority that takes place in "Shooting an Elephant"--an admittedly complex undermining that ultimately affirms through skepticism what it attempts to tear down--is an ironic strategy that is consistent with the glorification of loss found in melancholic kitsch. As I pointed out before, the theme of regret that the teacher apparently attempted to impose on "Horsing Around" also might seem, on first glance, to suggest melancholy. But taken in the context of a writing classroom, the concern on the part of the instructor to see an indication of regret can be explained by a desire to have the student's writing reflect an appropriate progression of moral development. In other

words, the instructor wants the essayistic equivalent of a happy ending. In that case, the desire for regret becomes a nostalgic yearning.

Connors is acknowledging this kitschification in his remark about transforming "the purity of the narrative into the teacher-favorite narrative genre of 'I did bad and learned a lesson' (153). It's not clear what Connors means by the "purity of the narrative," but his remark suggests that there are some other turn(s) and point(s) happening in the narrative that are as yet unexplored. This becomes evident when we compare the flatness of the tone of the ending that chalks it all up to beer, boredom, boyhood with the brutal vividness of the writing in other places of the piece. Take for example the following passage that describes the assassination of the crow:

We were out walking in the woods and Jim saw a crow, black as night, land in a tree. He aimed, shot, and killed the crow. I walked over, picked up the blood-soaked bird, and sat it with its wings spread wide in a small twig tree. I loaded my gun, walked back fifteen to twenty feet, turned, and fired. The bird was blown into about twelve pieces, just like a jigsaw puzzle. The ground was covered with powdery snow, so when the bird was shot a blood spray pattern covered that area. (152)

Connors refers to the sophistication of some of the writing before citing its moral lapse. Perhaps it is necessary to suspend moral judgment of this piece in order to better understand it. Indeed it might be that the romantic bravado of the writing rests in its refusal to submit to moral

censure. There is something almost Byronic in its celebration of the flaunting of rules. The narrator tells us:

Bill was approximately one-hundred feet away from me, and did not know what I was about to attempt. It was a good thing that he did not know, because he is one of those "follow-the-rules" kind of guys. Then Jim said, "Go ahead Adam, I dare you."

Note the exposition that occurs here, consistent with Hesse's understanding of the story being narrative plus exposition. The student is not merely relating one event after another: rather he comments on his narration, overtly as well as through the selection of narrative details, to imbue it with meaning and produce his story. It behooves us to pay attention to this narrative exposition so that we avoid falling prey to the fallacy that the student has an example but needs a theme. At this "point" in the story, the narrative announces its concern with the transgression of rules--not about the recognition in hindsight of evil about to be committed. This is reinforced in the following passage:

Without thinking of the seriousness involved, I raised the gun to my shoulder, took careful aim, and KABOOM! I nailed him in the left hind quarter and he let out a yelp like a dog getting its tail sliced off. At first I thought I might have killed the animal, but I was too afraid to stick around to find out. All I remember hearing after I shot the gun was the horse yelping and Bill shouting; going into hysterics about what I had done.

The relish with which this is related is as far away from regret as one can imagine. Indeed it suggests a pleasure taken in something that the narrator understands to be against the moral codes he is familiar with and a certain trepidation about what this might mean. This is an essay that has something to say about taking pleasure in that which the narrator understands is wrong from a larger moral framework. It is not, I would argue, an essay about regret where a turn creates a before and after moment. But then again, as I said before, I don't think Orwell's essay is well-served either with that description.

If I were in a class with this student, what would I do? I have a liberal, East Coast hatred of guns and hunters and a love of animals. I would probably dislike this student and maybe even hope he might get shot in the hind quarters with a .22. I find the actions related in that story barbaric, and I suppose I might point that out to him. And no doubt if he read the essay out loud in class, other students might point this out to him too. I don't know what the student would do with such information in revision: knowing that he earned the censure of his teacher and peers. Besides, I think he already has some idea how others might view his actions. He says as much in the details of the story. Despite my disgust, however, I wonder if I would be able to find the text interesting in its irreverence--I suppose calling it brave is going too far. And yet in a way it is just that. For it presumes to take and broadcast its illicit pleasure. This is not pleasant for me to know about, and yet I confess it is a far more interesting tale to hear than some of the repentance narratives I have encountered--stories about, say,

the evils of drink or drugs. I don't suppose I want people to write adolescent celebrations of substance abuse, but I wonder if it's our job to discourage, because they are unsettling to hear, the communication of such unholy insights or to push what must always be our limited moral framework on to the writing. Perhaps it is. But then I think of Adorno's assertion that "the law of the innermost form of the essay is heresy. By transgressing the orthodoxy of thought, something becomes visible in the object which it is orthodoxy's secret purpose to keep invisible" (171).

I don't guess that "Horsing Around" is the sort of thing that Adorno had in mind when he envisioned the essay as a vehicle of cultural criticism. And yet, like other student essays we receive, "Horsing Around" manages a certain heresy by disrupting the kitsch that often governs the composition game. By adding the sentiment of regret, the student capitulates to the aesthetic of transformation valued in the writing classroom. But by maintaining, despite any outside pressure, the humor of the experience, the student transgresses the subjectivity being urged upon him in that very same aesthetic. In his macabre humor, I see traces of the devilish laughter of irreverence that Kundera, in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, describes as an antidote to the kitsch mentality that promulgates uniformity.

"Like swimmers passing through the chlorine footbath en route to plunging into the pool, students must first be disinfected in Freshman English" (Bloom, "Freshman" 656) so that they and their writing will evince the sense of propriety the university and the workplace demand. If Bloom is right, then the goal of freshman composition is to

promulgate kitsch that in effect eliminates, or at least hides, deviation and uncertainty. Such erasure might also take with it the beginnings of any critical rhetoric inconsistent with the middle class perspective Bloom identifies. If we accept Bloom's premise, our sanitizing mission with regard to "Horsing Around" would seem to require of us a response of nostalgic kitsch: regardless of whether the student repents, we must at the very least show him that this is not the narrative of polite, liberal, middle class society, and any glee he feels in getting liquored up and shooting defenseless horses should be kept under wraps. Unless of course the author decides to classify his essay as a short story, in which case he might be let off the hook.

But it is not only in such personal narratives that we see the trajectory of nostalgic kitsch in effect. It shows up in another kind of student genre, one where we might least expect it. I am thinking of the kind of writing that teachers elicit through the practices of critical pedagogy where students are invited to engage in cultural criticism. Such assignments, removed from the personal writing that draws charges of irrelevancy or practicing therapy without a license, might seem safe from the clutches of kitsch. But attempts to engage in critical teaching practices run the risk of producing the kind of writing that I call the "conversion narrative." In this genre, students identify a nefarious social or political practice that they have inadvertently and naively participated in, point out the error of their ways, and proclaim that never again shall they be part of such infamy. Sometimes such declarations are topped off with a profusion of thanks to the teacher who has

shown them the light. (The "cult of the teacher" is another way that kitsch can govern the writing class.)

Of course it is ironic that critical pedagogy should produce nostalgic kitsch, since its goal is to engage students in the questioning of normative authority. Ira Shor describes the critical pedagogue as one who "needs to model an active skeptical learner . . . who invites students to be curious and critical . . . and creative" (Pedagogy for Liberation 8). Such an "invitation" would seem to work against the sort of totalitarian kitsch that, as I mentioned at the start of this chapter, Flavell and Lugg connect with the promotion of an unproblematic view of art and culture. Surely at the heart of critical pedagogy is a process of problematizing that is antithetical to maintaining the idyll of nostalgic kitsch. But the challenge for critical pedagogy is how to encourage social criticism without lapsing into dogma, a difficult line to walk. This is the lapse that Maxine Hairston complains of when she criticizes the political bent of current composition theory ("Diversity"). Hairston is not particularly convincing in her argument, and it is easy enough to counter her outrage over the teaching of ideology in the classroom by pointing out that ideology is always present whether we consciously teach it or not. Nonetheless, I'm sympathetic to the impulse of her criticism, which I see as being about the curtailment of a process of inquiry. I have encountered such estoppage first-hand in the kitsch of the conversion narrative.

As an illustration of the conversion narrative phenomenon, I describe here an assignment that I have used in my freshman composition classes. Let me first say that my

goals for this assignment were twofold: 1) to give space in the classroom and in students' writing for discussion of a social and economic issue and 2) to provide a framework through which students could move to an enhanced understanding of a particular issue. Similar to the way Ira Shor problematizes the topic of work as described in Critical Teaching and Everyday Life (125-54), I attempted to complicate what might at first appear to students as an "unproblematic" subject. The subject in this case was the doll Barbie and her manufacturer Mattel. I first got the idea for this assignment when I noticed a spate of articles in The Nation and The Humanist on overseas sweatshops that produce Barbie and other Mattel products. The Nation featured a magnificent photo cover of Barbie dazzlingly decked out as the Statue of Liberty in red, white and blue sequined attire.

Finding her irresistible, I brought this picture of Barbie to the first day of class and asked students to write down their reactions upon seeing this photo. When students read their responses out loud many, especially men, expressed difficulty and annoyance at having to write about a picture of a doll. Some wanted to know why she was dressed as the Statue of Liberty. Other students commented on how very blonde and white this Barbie was and questioned what this might mean for a child who was not so very blonde and white to play with such a doll. Two women alluded to the impossible figure that Barbie sported, and other women reminisced fondly about their days of playing with Barbie or about their daughters' delight in collecting the dolls. In the next class, we picked up on some of these themes by

reading the Marge Piercy poem "Barbie Doll" and an excerpt from Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye where the character Claudia details her hatred of dolls. When students read their responses to these passages, a discussion ensued about how significant a doll could really be in a child's development. The class seemed divided, with some taking the position that a doll has a limited effect on a child's self-esteem and others arguing that dolls and other toys can reinforce positive and negative feelings about self-worth.

Despite these overarching positions, I would describe this discussion as being varied and rich, with students moving back and forth between the theme of cultural representations and their own and their children's experiences with dolls and other toys. For example, one student vehemently asserted that she would never allow her African-American child to play with a white doll, which prompted another student to ask if that meant white children shouldn't play with black dolls. The conversation ranged from questions of racism to issues of gender. The open-ended spirit of the discussion contrasted markedly with what the next phase of the assignment evoked. I asked students to locate the articles in The Nation by Eyal Press and The Humanist by Anton Foek about the conditions for factory workers in Mattel sweatshops around the world, especially in Thailand, and to write down their reactions to reading these articles. The responses tended towards unanimity in expressing a horror and condemnation of what the mostly women workers had to endure. At this stage, some students began making declarations of boycotting Barbie, but still others, while expressing sympathy with the exploited women who

produced Barbie, felt there was little that could be done about the situation. Parents talked about the difficulty of saying no to children about toys, at which point I asked the class to consider consumerism as a broader issue and the place it has in our lives.

The papers that students produced were in some sense anticlimactic when compared to the to and fro of the discussions that preceded their final work. I asked students to do either one of two assignments. One was to write a meta-cognitively oriented piece in which students reflected back on the last few weeks of class in order to chart their changing (or unchanging) perspectives on Barbie. The second possibility involved drafting a letter to the CEO of Mattel, (at the time Sean Fitzgerald), who had written an editorial response to The Humanist objecting to Foek's article and his maligning of Mattel. Fitzgerald's response amounted to a very poor defense of the company, and students were quick to note that he did little to contradict the evidence presented in the articles. In fact, most students availed themselves of the second option in completing the assignment and produced letters roundly condemning the company and telling Fitzgerald he ought to spend some time in the factories whose practices he attempted to defend. One student, who was particularly eloquent as he read his letter out loud in class, began his missive by declaring that in his English class he had been learning the truth about Barbie. He dramatically concluded by stating that no child of his would ever be found playing with Mattel toys. This flourish brought applause from the class. Other readers expressed similar sentiments. There was a feeling, and it was a good

feeling, of camaraderie and consensus in our writing circle.

Fewer students chose the first option in completing the assignment. Of those that did, some wrote in a style similar to the letter writers, recounting how Barbie went from simply being a doll to become for them a representation of the suffering of factory workers. But some students, who did not read out loud, had the courage or audacity to write that not much had changed for them with regard to Barbie. They expressed appropriate feelings of sorrow for the Thai women, but they didn't expect that they would stop buying Barbie dolls for their kids. Why should kids be burdened with this knowledge about the world, one student wrote. Children should remain innocent for as long as possible. Such sentiments might have disrupted the happy circle of consensus that the class formed when students read their condemnatory letters. Had the silent students spoken, debate might have continued as it had in our discussions. But I'm not sure there was room for disruptive words in our reading circle that day. As I mentioned earlier, when Kundera writes of the normative effects of the kitsch mentality, he uses the analogy of the circle. "I too once danced in a ring," he writes of his membership in the Czech Communist Party. "Then one day I said something I would better have left unsaid. I was expelled from the Party and had to leave the circle" ("Laughter" 65). In English the word "party" puns to suggest the inertial effect that such consensus can have. After all, nobody wants to ruin the party. Everybody wants to be part of the circle.

This is not to say that I don't think the assignment was worthwhile. I think I achieved my two stated objectives of

problematizing a subject that had social and economic significance, and I do think such objectives are valuable. But the difficulty with the assignment is that it leaves little room for intellectual maneuvering and pushes (most) students in an ineluctable and predictable direction. Perhaps this is not always a bad thing, and perhaps reaching the conclusions that sweatshops are evil and that Mattel should be boycotted are not the sorts of ideas that I want to see disputed. But then again what connection does the rhetoric of a letter, unsent, to the CEO of Mattel have to the life of the student who wrote it? I suppose this question is another way of asking whether or not the students are sincere in their declarations and their intentions. How could I know and does it matter? The point is the nature of the assignment and the genre of the letter would preclude savvy students from reaching any other sort of conclusion. To say that some students were genuinely affected by what they read about Barbie does not rule out that the same students understand the rhetorical value of nostalgic kitsch. They read their teacher well, and I, after all, was the intended audience of that letter--not Sean Fitzgerald.

And certainly it disquieted me to read the statement that children should be allowed to preserve their innocence about the goings on in the world. Whose children? I wrote as a comment. Who's looking out for the innocence of the children whose mothers make Barbie? The uninterrogated declaration constitutes its own kind of nostalgic kitsch, and it relies on the success of the cultural clichés Lugg identifies as being key to political kitsch--if referencing children's innocence works in political rhetoric why not in

English class? But still I'm sorry the student's comment didn't see the light of day in the classroom; that we managed on that occasion to expel it from our happy circle. For it might have produced discussion and dialogue. It might have forced the letter writers and their teacher to come down from their soap boxes of kitsch and confront dissent. Of course we all might have felt a little less happy; a little less unified in the end.

By invoking the concept of kitsch, I have attempted to provide another lens through which to view student writing, one resistant to the dichotomies first-person rhetoric in the classroom so often finds itself in the position of accommodating: did the event being narrated really happen or not? Does the writer really believe the belief being professed or is it an act? Accepting the premise that all writing is a rhetorical act carried out among writer, audience and context isn't always particularly illuminating, especially when, regardless of this acceptance, we still tend at some level to insist on the conflation of text and life in student writing, indeed find ourselves only able to proceed from this point. This tendency arises not only out of composition's concern with development and subjectivity but also from the nature of the truth-claims of first-person non-fiction in general: the "contract" of the genre implies a belief in transparent veracity where the reader expects what is said to be "true."

Are students who write conversion narratives sincere? Does the student who composed "Horsing Around" feel the regret required of him? Perhaps the answers to these questions are not so all-or-nothing, or perhaps the questions

themselves need to be slightly revised. Instead of questioning whether what we encounter is genuine, we might ask: what narrative paradigm is shaping the terms of the sincerity or regret, and how does that paradigm intersect with the institutional forces that are a key component in the production of classroom writing? For students might be sincere or regretful in ways that are better understood as partial rather than totalizing, as rhetorical stances that function in temporary, imaginative, or vicarious ways in response to the circumstances and contexts that elicit the writing.

The concern with subjectivity and the development of the writer that results in composition's "bold moral and civic claims" also produces, often through a rhetoric of community, a complex climate of kitsch in the writing classroom that student writing and teacher response seek to navigate. By understanding kitsch as a complicated discourse, we can better understand those same texts and responses through a paradigm alternative to the equation of text/life and its subsequent derivations. The emphasis on writing "communities" that feature cooperation and consent, while they have in many ways been productive pedagogical models, also can produce a kitsch writing of consensus. Expressivism, despite its emphasis on the individual, is nonetheless steeped in communal pedagogies and generic, romantic constructions of the self that dip into both nostalgia and melancholy, discourses which are themselves inflected by class. Even critical pedagogy with its emphasis on interrogation may lend itself to a kitsch aesthetic. The essay, as a problematizing genre, may have a tendency to work

against kitsch, but practiced as a classroom genre it becomes caught in the net of kitsch that covers composition practices.

Because of the nature of composition's enterprise, its abiding interest in the development of writers as well as texts, kitsch may be an ever-present factor, not one that can be altogether eliminated or removed from the dynamics of texts and classrooms. What I am suggesting is that kitsch can perhaps be negotiated. Is kitsch always an undesirable phenomenon? Conversion narratives may very well have their place in helping students try on a new role. Connors may be right that we should respond to a student's representation of senseless cruelty with humanistic concern. As an analytical and pedagogical tool, kitsch offers no simplistic or totalizing answers, but it does provide us with another means of thinking about what texts we are eliciting, why, and how we are reading them. It helps us, I believe, to function in our classrooms in a more informed way. If we understand the rhetoric of kitsch, we can allow that rhetoric, on a case by case basis, to supplement our understanding of the production of--and our responses to--that student writing that in particular provokes our bafflement.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kundera's views of kitsch and its social and political implications can be gleaned from The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, and The Art of the Novel. For Kundera the concept of kitsch is closely connected to belief in the idyll, which for him explains the cultural success and duplicity of the Czech Communist Party: People have always aspired to an idyll, a garden where nightingales sing, a realm of harmony where the world does not rise up as a stranger against man nor man against other men, where the world and all its people are molded from a single stock and the fire lighting up the heavens is the fire burning in the hearts of men, where every man is a note in a magnificent Bach fugue and anyone who refuses his note is a mere black dot, useless and meaningless, easily caught and squashed between the fingers like an insect. (Laughter and Forgetting 8)

<sup>2</sup> According to Dorfles, kitsch is a problem of individuals who believe that art should produce pleasant, sugary feelings; or even that art should form a kind of "condiment," a kind of background music, a decoration, a status symbol even, as a way of shining in one's social circle; in no case should it [art] be a serious matter, a tiring exercise, an involved and critical activity. (15-16)

Dorfles is building on the understanding of kitsch drawn from the likes of Benjamin, Broch, and Greenberg who in turn link the idea of kitsch to modernity and mass reproduction. Kitsch is contrasted with ideas of originality, genuineness, and authenticity.

<sup>3</sup> Walzer makes a distinction between monologic and univocal rhetoric. The former he connects with Aristotle's manipulation of audience and the latter with the Enlightenment ideal of the subject seeking and expressing truth.

<sup>4</sup> Beginning in the late '80s, a great deal of interest was shown in the genre of the essay and its relation to college writing. Particular note was made of how the supposed essay writing taking place in the college classroom had little to do with the form as practiced by essayists themselves. Often taking Montaigne as a starting point and tracing the essay historically and in different national traditions, critics emphasized the spirit of inquiry and open-ended form that characterized the essay. Also of

interest is the genre's emphasis on subjectivity in creating and expressing knowledge. Heilker, for example, defines the essay as "an epistemologically skeptical text that transgresses disciplinary and discursive boundaries" (53). For a sampling of scholarship on the essay see: Anderson, Butrym, Chadbourne, Good, Heilker, and Spellmeyer.

<sup>5</sup> See especially Spellmeyer.

<sup>6</sup> The essay may be said to have something of an aristocratic beginning in Montaigne, who, disgusted with the dogma of public rhetoric, retreated to his chateau to begin his book of the self. Graham Good, however, specifically identifies an anti-bourgeois strain in the essay, claiming its peripatetic form and *dégagé* observational stance runs counter to the bourgeois values of industry and efficiency (11).

<sup>7</sup> In speaking of the twentieth century "new middle classes," Wallerstein says that "their often quite hedonistic style of life de-emphasized the puritanical strain associated with bourgeois culture; to that extent they were 'aristocratic'" (96-7).

<sup>8</sup> Admittedly, this strategy of effacement serves ironically to enhance that moral authority. This convolution further attests to the complexity of the essay's form that Newkirk's analysis fails to credit.

<sup>9</sup> See The Art of the Novel. Kundera continually stresses that the novel is a genre of inquiry.

**Appendix**

The following pages (262-277) contain the narratives produced by Larissa, Mary, and Julie, respectively, for the booklet that the writing group assembled for the library at Gilda's Club.

## Star (Larissa)

I ring the doorbell of Jacqueline's apartment ready for my healing session. "I meant to call you but I didn't have the time," she says quickly.

As she pulls me into the foyer of her Westside apartment, she adds, "My friend for many years is staying with me and is an excellent healer. She can remove tumors, non-surgically. Would you be interested in meeting her? Her name is Star."

Her name annoys me. It doesn't sound genuine. Maybe for a cat, not a grownup.

Actually I had heard of her before today. At my suggestion, my husband, Bob, had gone to see Jacqueline a week earlier for a healing. As she had helped me, I hoped she could remove some of the anxiety and fear my husband was carrying. At his session, Jacqueline had told him about her friend from Texas, who was very special, and that she wanted to give me a gift of a session with Star.

When Bob told me about Star's powers, I said, "I'm incredulous. Still, if she can remove my tumors through energy healing . . ." The words hung in mid air. I knew it was farfetched but then again seven months ago I would have classified all healers as charlatans. Yet over the last few months, I had seen improvements after working with healers from all over the world. I had no surgery, no radiation, no chemotherapy; yet, my blood test results had shown dramatic improvements. Some of these results were probably due to changes in diet, from pizza and diet cokes to wheat grass and tofu, as well as a zillion supplements that entered my mouth everyday, but I was sure that my healing sessions were a big

part of my getting better. Now if only these healers could shrink those swollen lymph nodes sitting on my pancreas, I would jump for joy and do testimonials to non-traditional interventions for the rest of my life.

The day before my healing session with Jacqueline, I had my weekly scheduled appointment with my oncologist Dr. Mitchell Gaynor. Bob immediately told him about Jacqueline's offer and asked: "What's your opinion of Larissa seeing this person who can remove tumors through energy?"

Turning to me Gaynor said, "You should probably skip it because you don't know who this person is."

"Could she do me any harm?" I asked

"Probably not," he said, "but you never know."

That was enough for me to hear. I knew I would turn down Jacqueline's gift if she offered it directly to me.

But here I am at her apartment and Star is in the next room. I wonder to myself, "Why didn't she find the time to call me?" I am annoyed because she has put me on the spot."

Reluctantly I say, "Okay." I like Jacqueline a lot and she has helped me so much. I am grateful in the work we did together to prepare me for a potentially dangerous and often unsuccessful procedure involving the pancreas. I came through with flying colors. Besides, I'm not good at saying "no." I hate to hurt people's feelings. I hate to get people angry with me.

I look up. From the bedroom appears this slovenly, bulbous figure, dressed in faded black rumpled garments, with a facial expression in kind--mean and dark. I want to tell her to go back into the bedroom--go wash and comb your hair--a greasy mop reaching in all directions. I shudder at the

thought of her hands on me. "How could anyone possibly call this woman 'Star'?"

Jacqueline suggests I give her some background. For the hundredth time I recite, "I was diagnosed at Memorial Sloan-Kettering with Stage 4 cancer and given a life expectancy of up to nine months." I smile and tell her how much improvement there has been, although I still have enlarged lymph nodes sitting on my pancreas. "I have grown so much emotionally over the last few months," I say, glancing at Jacqueline for confirmation, adding, "three weeks ago I had my first chemotherapy session, and tomorrow is my second and although it was one of the hardest things to get myself to do I . . ."

"Fuck," Star says.

"What?" I say startled by her response, unsure that I have even heard right.

"She repeats, 'Fuck.'" She starts to say something about its destructiveness and lethal effects to my body.

I interrupt her. "Stop. This is not good for me. This is not what I want to hear. I know this is not right for me."

I stand up ready to leave. I want to get out of here immediately. I walk to the door, Jacqueline and Star trailing behind me.

Star says, "I'm going into the bedroom so you can have your session with Jacqueline." I turn around. Star and I stare at each other. "There are cancer personalities," she says. "You do not have one. You will live at least twenty more years."

I almost laugh out loud. That's the number that Bob and

I had decided on just the other day.

Star starts to explain where she is coming from. I am not interested in explanations. She sees that and goes into the bedroom.

Jacqueline and I stand in the foyer.

"are you angry with me?" she asks.

I say "No. I'm angry with Star. Doesn't she realize how destructive she is?"

Jacqueline says she is a wonderful technician.

"How can she be an excellent healer if she destroys the patient's spirit?" I ask.

Jacqueline said she wanted this to be a gift for me.

"Come do a few minutes of healing with me," she begs.

I agree and slowly walk back into her living room and climb onto the treatment table. I can't relax. My mind is going a mile a minute replaying the scene. I feel wounded and betrayed. I realize I am angry with Jacqueline. For once I am not going to ignore my feelings. I sit up and again say, "Let's stop the treatment. This is not working."

Seated on the elevated table I am eyeball to eyeball with Jacqueline. I say, "When you asked me before if I was angry with you, I wasn't being honest. But I realize now I am very angry with you."

Jacqueline squirms and starts to protest, saying she only wanted the best for me.

I continue. The words tumble out. "I trusted you, Jacqueline and you violated the professional/patient relationship by putting me in a position where I could have been harmed. It's ironic. Star called the words, spoken by the doctor from Memorial Sloan-Kettering, toxic--those words

that sentenced me to less than nine months of life. But Jacqueline isn't she more toxic because her judgment was unsolicited. Bob asked Dr. Kampel--and more than once--what he considered to be the effects of my cancer on my life span. Kampel didn't want to answer, but Bob kept persisting--I think, not knowing, not having any idea, of the serious of my illness. No one asked Star for her opinion."

I turn from Star to Jacqueline's role in this.

"You should have warned Star that I had already started chemotherapy. You knew about it. You knew how frightened I was, how torn I was because Dr. Kampel said it would be useless--I would just be sick as a dog. You knew I had tried everything else but the lymph nodes were not shrinking. You knew what Gaynor had said. He was afraid--he had this feeling--that if I didn't do chemotherapy the cancer would spread to my brain. You knew how essential my hair is to me--that sometimes I felt I'd rather die than be bald. And you also knew Star. Her attitude toward chemotherapy could not have been a surprise to you. You should have told her that I had already started treatment and, if she couldn't be supportive, then you should have kept her miles away from me."

And with that I said "Goodbye" to Jacqueline, and never saw her again professionally.

My second chemotherapy appointment is a few days later. I told Dr. Gaynor what had taken place. Only then did he tell me that he had met Star and found her energy negative. Without saying it, I understood he hadn't forbidden me to see her, for it had to be up to me to decide what was beneficial and what was harmful. He added that he hoped Jacqueline

learned something from this experience. Interesting I never thought that this could be of service to her. I only had thought how wonderful that I could now stand up for myself and let my truth prevail. Isn't life remarkable? And wasn't it marvelous that I could feel this way even though when I touched my head chunks of my beautifully thick, dark brown, naturally straight hair, fell all over my hand?

"C" is not for Charles (Mary)

Mara came to visit us in October of 1999, one year after my husband, Charles, was diagnosed with cancer. Her visit was a momentous occasion in that I had never really met her. The last time I had seen my cousin, she was a baby in a crib, and I was only nine years old.

Only our two best friends and Charles sister knew of his illness, so we didn't feel we should spoil the joy of a family reunion by informing Mara and her husband that Charles had cancer. So we acted as if everything were normal.

We took them to dinner at Cafe Botanic and Charles waxed loquacious as usual. He looked and sounded fine. Anyone would have attributed his hair loss to age and would have suspected that his portly appearance was the result of too much good food--not the surgical hernia which required he wear a binder that contributed to his girth.

Mara and Rich spent the next few days sightseeing and playing tourist. On the day they were going to the Statue of Liberty, they invited us for coffee before their trek. Again we talked and laughed and enjoyed being together. Before they caught the bus downtown, Charles took them on a quick walking tour of the East Village shops where, at one point, Mara took his picture. Looking at that picture, no one could have guessed--not even Charles-- that in less than fifteen months he would be dead.

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How did this happen to us? Charles was one of those people of whom it is said: "He was never sick a day in his life." He prided himself on his strength. I, on the other hand, have had several major illnesses, so he should have outlived me by at least twenty years. His parents, in their 90s, are still alive for heaven's sake! What went wrong?

We had both worked hard all of our lives and had retired ten months apart. We were in the process of making the transition to the well-deserved new phase of our life. A year after I retired, Charles was diagnosed with the big "C," actually the big double "C": colon cancer. Instead of new adventures, the next two years were filled with visits to the oncologist, chemo treatments, and CT scans. We tried to maintain our former life style in what time there was beyond the "cancer life." We told almost no one of his illness because we didn't want to burden our friends and also because we could that way escape our "cancer life" temporarily while we were with them.

We tried to incorporate the cancer into our life as part of our daily routine, but as Charles' strength declined, non-cancer activities decreased until we had time and energy only for keeping him alive. Our quality of life disappeared, and finally his weakness forced me to get him to the hospital-- five days before he died.

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The phone woke me out of a sound sleep. It was 6:30 in the morning. Even before I answered, I knew it was the call, the one to tell me my husband didn't have much longer to live.

After hanging up, I tried not to panic. All I could think of was what Mara had told me. She had booked a flight to Wisconsin to attend our uncle's funeral, but on the morning she got up to get ready to go, she collapsed--physically and emotionally. She never caught her flight, never made it to the funeral. I was so afraid that the same thing would happen to me, that my legs would turn to Jell-o or that I would have some stupid accident. I was alone in the apartment; there was no one to help me if I needed it.

I dressed hurriedly but carefully, dismissing any thought of makeup. I don't think I even brushed my teeth. I knew I would have to take a taxi, but would I be able to find one quickly so early in the morning? After leaving my apartment building, I walked to University Place where I thought I stood a good chance of catching a cab. I prayed I wouldn't have to wait long. Then a taxi appeared out of nowhere. My relief was instantaneous. "I'll make it," I thought, "there's hardly any traffic."

As the cab approached the hospital, I told the driver to let me off by the awning which I knew to be the main entrance. But the driver misunderstood my instruction. Once he missed the left turn, it was too late. He dropped me off at the entrance to the Emergency Room, almost a block and a half away.

I walked as quickly as I could, careful not to trip or fall (which had happened to me twice in recent years when I was rushing). Everything moved along once I got inside: guest

pass at the front desk, nobody waiting for the elevator. When I got upstairs, the floor was very quiet, almost as if everyone, including the staff, were asleep. As I turned the corner to the hallway, I saw two nurses whispering as they came out of my husband's room. They looked concerned. When I reached them, the male nurse said, "your husband died two minutes ago." My heart sank. I had failed to reach him in time. Did I arrive too late because I was overly cautious or was it the damned cab driver's fault?

My husband died alone, without anyone there who loved him. His sister always says, "If it happened, it was meant to be." Small comfort!

Let's Go Moh: My Fight for My Shoulder (Julie)

Everyone has a left shoulder and there was a time when mine looked like everyone else's. But that seems like going back to the dark ages, or at least to when I was under 45. At about that age, I started getting growths coming out that had to be surgically removed.

I remember the first time it happened. I was in Florida visiting my in-laws. I noticed a red bump which then started to protrude through the skin. As it came through, it changed to become the same color as the rest of my skin. It was long, dangling, tubular and very disagreeable. "Ugh," I thought. I had put a bandaid on it, but it must have come off and since I was wearing a sundress, it was visible.

"That thing doesn't go away," my mother-in-law said.

"It doesn't look like it. I'll have to go to a doctor when I came back to New York."

I couldn't get to a doctor immediately, so I continued wearing a bandaid. The bandaid became a part of me over the years, something like a person wearing a badge saying who they were, but in my case it was indicative of "work in progress." I went to a plastic surgeon who removed it. After a few days the biopsy came back "benign," and I was so relieved that I put it out of my mind.

Apparently it was out of my mind, but not out of my body, since it started to come back again about 10 months later. "Yuk!" that ugly thing again.

I went to a different plastic surgeon who again removed it. The biopsy was negative again, but this time the doctor said ominously, "There's something going on under there." I had the growth removed maybe 10 times over the next fifteen

years, always with a negative biopsy report, but also always with that doctor's words floating into my mind unbidden and with my conscious mind pushing them out again.

By that time, the shoulder was completely messed up, full of scars all over, because the growths didn't come back in the same spot. I contemplated seriously having plastic surgery done on the area, but the procedure was much too unpleasant, and considering what happened later, it was a good thing I didn't do it. If I wore a dress that didn't completely cover me on top, I was back to wearing the bandaid to hide the scarring even if there were no bumps at the time.

"There is something going on under there." Those words came back to haunt me the day I had the growth removed for the tenth time. This time the biopsy came back malignant.

Again, I thought. I felt both weary and anxious. I had had a lumpectomy followed by radiation and chemo only about a year and a half ago. My anxiety was somewhat calmed down at first by the doctors who told me that this kind of tumor almost never metastasizes. However, they failed to say what it did do.

Upon coming home that day, I sat and groaned, cursed and shook my head from side to side and when he heard the news my husband did the same. We also sat and debated whether the lab reports over the years had been inaccurate or whether the diagnosis had changed. All of this wasn't very useful, so the next thing I did was call my oncologist, Dr. Brown. "I know someone," Dr. Brown said.

"You recommend him?"

"Yes. He has a specialty in exactly your condition."  
His name is Dr. Kennon. He is an orthopedic surgeon

with a sub-speciality in soft tissue sarcoma. My diagnosis was DFSP (Dermatofibrosarcoma Protuberance), which is a form of sarcoma.

Dr. Kennon was an Israeli, about 45 years old and seemed nice. As I soon found out, initial impressions can be misleading. Not only did he fail to get clear margins on two successive operations, but while discussing the operative report and the pathology report after the second one, he rudely pulled the pathology report out of my hand in an attempt to hide from me the knowledge of the inadequacy of his surgery! I was very angry at Dr. Kennon, but you probably wouldn't have known it, except for the set line of my mouth. Out of this anger came determination: that I had to take control of the further direction that the treatment would take. Control for me meant first of all reading and then making decisions. I didn't have much confidence in the doctors, and no one I knew had this condition, so it was just me and the books, which was not an inappropriate combination since I'm a librarian! I started on the most intensive and extensive medical research of my life. It was a crucial issue on which to see what my research skills could accomplish. I found out that a type of surgery that is usually used in skin cancer, like Basal Carcinoma, called Moh's surgery was now the first line DFSP. With Moh's, a dermatological surgeon makes slides under a microscope of the tissues to see where there are tumors remaining. He also makes little maps to help him pinpoint the right spots. If he doesn't get it all out the first time, he repeats the process and keeps cutting until the slides show everything's clear.

I read original studies which showed that Moh's had a 98% cure rate as indicated by no recurrence after 5 years, as compared to only about 50% for conventional surgery. Dr. Brown should have known that, but apparently, he was not up to date on the latest developments. I didn't drop him, but I was annoyed with him and did not accept his recommendation for any other doctors or procedures. There is a patient's library at Beth Israel hospital and this was my major resource. I will always be grateful to the librarian there who went into Medline for me without charging me anything for the printouts. I also used the New York Academy of Medicine and the Sloan-Kettering libraries. If I needed to be convinced any further that Moh's was the way to go, it came in the form of a consultation with a Dr. Paul Smith, a surgeon who was covering for the doctor who did my breast operation. After the regular examination, I showed him the operative reports from both the operations of Dr. Kennon for his opinion.

"Dr. Kennan did basically the same operation twice. What he should have done was something much more extensive (read invasive) in order to get clear margins."

"What do you mean?"

"He should have gone into the bone and muscle. He needed to take a muscle out of your back and put it into your arm. But of course then you would not be able to move your arm much."

I gasped silently, and said, "Dr. Smith, I would be very reluctant to do that." He looked at me sidewise and upwards at the same time, meaning if you don't do that you are doomed.

I knew from my reading that with Moh's surgery, there would be no need to cut into muscle and enormous amounts of good tissue in order to get to the tumor.

He made it clear that in order to get clear margins with conventional surgery, I would have to be crippled. Well, I wasn't going to be! Again, anger served as a constructive motivation as I resolved there and then that I was going to have Moh's surgery, that I was going to stand firm, no matter what they said or did to sway me, and believe me, they tried! They couldn't, because as the old spiritual says: "Ain't nobody gonna turn me 'round."

This was a fight to the finish. The combatants lined up as follows: the dermatological surgeons with me, my scientific articles and books against all the other doctors including the radiologists. It was mainly a fight over turf. These surgeons (mainly orthopedists) had traditionally been the only ones to operate on DFSP were much more interested in protecting their income that they obtained from conventional surgery and their professional hold on that corner of medicine than they were in impartial evaluation of scientific studies. What was best for me was of no consequence. I felt that they didn't care about me and so I was even more intent on resisting them.

I went to a number of consultations to clarify different aspects of the situation, and on the way over to the appointments I sang myself a little song: "Let's go Moh, get it out," to keep my spirits up.

At first I thought I might be able to avoid surgery altogether and just have radiation. I went to a radiologist named Dr. Shasha who was willing to radiate me without having

surgery. But when I mentioned that I was considering having Moh's he said, "You'll get more cancer from that." But of course he was interested in radiating me. I just sang my little song to myself and resisted his pressures. Some doctors used the excuse the area of my shoulder was too large for Moh's, but I knew this to be untrue. One southern gentleman named Dr. Oft, implied that if clear margins could not be gotten, I should just have the normal surgery over and over again. This was the other main point of view besides that of Dr. Smith who preferred to cripple me. Anything was acceptable to them as long as they didn't lose their business to the dermatologists.

The finish was in sight.

Dr. James Spencer at Mount Sinai did the Moh's under local anesthesia in his office. I walked into his office on the day of the operation and you know what i said, don't you? "Let's go Moh, get it out." And he did! It was done in two segments, one in April, 1999, and one in July of 1999, due to the fact that my health insurance would not hospitalize me for enough days all at the same time. He did a good job, but as one final aggravation in this story, he did not give me enough anesthesia, causing me the most acute pain I've ever had. After Dr,Spencer did his part, both times Dr. Jin Chun did reconstructive surgery under general anesthesia. He did such a good job that it looked much better than before, even though he had to do skin grafting, and I don't even have to wear a bandaid anymore!

In the end, to paraphrase what my mother-in-law said many years ago, "That thing has finally gone away." Amen.

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