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BEYOND HOPE:
RHETORICS OF MOBILITY, POSSIBILITY, AND LITERACY

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DISSERTATION

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Abstract

When writing teachers enter the classroom, they often bring with them a deep faith in the power of literacy to rectify social inequalities and improve their students' social and economic standing. It is this faith—this hope for change—that draws some writing teachers to locations of social and economic hardship. I am interested in how teachers and theorists construct their own narratives of social mobility, possibility, and literacy. My dissertation analyzes the production and expression of beliefs about literacy in the narratives of a diverse group of writing teachers and theorists, from those beginning their careers to those who are published and widely read. The central questions guiding this study are: *How do teachers' and theorists' narratives of becoming literate intersect with literacy theories?* and *How do such literacy narratives intersect with beliefs in the power of literacy to improve individuals' lives socially, economically, and personally?* I contend that the professional literature needs to address more fully how teachers' and theorists' personal histories with literacy shape what they see as possible (and desirable) for students, especially those from marginalized communities.

A central focus of the dissertation is on how teachers and theorists attempt to resolve a paradox they are likely to encounter in narratives about literacy. On one hand, they are immersed in a popular culture that cherishes narrative links between literacy and economic advancement (and, further, between such advancement and a “good life”). On the other hand, in professional discourse and in teacher preparation courses, they are likely to encounter narratives that complicate an assumed causal relationship between

literacy and economic progress. Understanding, through literacy narratives, how teachers and theorists chart a practical path through or around this paradox can be beneficial to literacy education in three ways. First, it can offer direction in professional development and teacher education, addressing how teachers negotiate the boundaries between personal experience, theory, and pedagogy. Second, it can help teachers create spaces wherein students can explore the impact of paradoxical views about the role of literacy on their own lives. Finally, it can offer direction in public policy discourse, extending awareness of what we want—and need—from English language arts education in the twenty-first century. To explore these issues, I draw on case studies and ethnographic observation as well as narrative inquiry into teachers' and theorists' published literacy narratives. I situate my findings within three interrelated frames: 1) the narratives of new teachers, 2) the published works of literacy educators and theorists, and 3) my own literacy narrative.

My first chapter, "Beyond Hope," explores the tenuous connections between hope and critique in literacy studies and provides a methodological overview of the study. I argue that scholarship must move beyond a singular focus on either hope or critique in order to identify the transformative potential of literacy in particular circumstances. Analyzing literacy narratives provides a way of locating a critically informed sense of possibility. My second chapter, "Making Teachers, Making Literacy," explores the intersection between teachers' lives and the theories they study, based on qualitative analysis of a preservice course for secondary education English teachers. I examine how these preservice English teachers understood literacy, how their narratives of becoming literate and teaching English connected—and did not connect—with theoretical and

pedagogical positions, and how these stories might inform their future work as practitioners. Centering primarily on preservice teachers who resisted Nancie Atwell's pedagogy of possibility because they found it too good to be true, this research concentrates on moments of disjuncture, as expressed in class discussion and in one-on-one interviews, when literacy theories failed to align with aspiring teachers' understandings of their own experiences and also with what they imagined as possible in disadvantaged educational settings.

In my third and fourth chapters, I analyze the narratives of celebrated teachers and theorists who put forth an agenda that emphasizes possibilities through literacy, examining how they negotiate the relationship between their own literacy stories and literacy theories. Specifically, I investigate the narratives of three proponents of critical literacy: Mike Rose, Paulo Freire, and Myles Horton, all highly respected literacy teachers whose working-class backgrounds influenced their commitment to teaching in disenfranchised communities. In chapter 3, "Reading *Lives on the Boundary*," I demonstrate how Mike Rose's 1989 autobiographical text, *Lives on the Boundary*, juxtaposes rhetorics of mobility with critiques of such possibility. Through an analysis of work published in professional journals, I offer a reception history of Rose's narrative, focusing specifically on how teachers have negotiated the tension between hope and critique. I follow this analysis with three case studies, drawn from a larger sampling, that inquire into the personal connections that writing teachers make with *Lives on the Boundary*. The teachers in this study, who provided written responses and participated in audio-recorded follow-up interviews, were asked to compare Rose's story to their own stories, considering how their personal literacy histories influenced their teaching. My

findings illustrate how a group of teachers and theorists have projected their own assessments of what literacy and higher education can and cannot accomplish onto this influential text.

In my fourth chapter, “Horton and Freire’s *Road* as Literacy Narrative,” I concentrate on Myles Horton and Paulo Freire’s 1990 collaborative spoken book, *We Make the Road by Walking*. Central to my analysis are the educators’ stories about their formative years, including their own primary and secondary education experiences. I argue that *We Make the Road by Walking* demonstrates how theories of literacy cannot be divorced from personal histories. I begin by examining the spoken book as a literacy narrative that fuses personal and theoretical knowledge, focusing specifically on its authors’ ideas on theory. Drawing on Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope—the intersection of time and space within narrative—I then explore the literacy narratives emerging from the production process of the book, in a video production about Horton and Freire’s meeting, and ultimately in the two men’s reflections on their childhood years (*Dialogic*). Interspersed with these accounts is archival material on the book’s editorial production that illustrates the value of increased dialogue between personal history and theories of literacy.

My fifth chapter is both a reflective analysis and a qualitative study of my work at a men’s medium-high security prison in Illinois, where I conducted research and served as the instructor of an upper-level writing course, “Writing for a Change,” in the spring of 2009. Entitled “Doing Time with Literacy Narratives,” this chapter explores the complex ways in which literacy and incarceration are configured in students’ narratives as well as my own. With and against students’ stories, I juxtapose my own experiences with

literacy, particularly in relation to being the son of an imprisoned father. In exploring the intersections between such stories, I demonstrate how literacy narratives can function as a heuristic for exploring beliefs about literacy between teachers and students both inside and outside of the prison-industrial complex.

My conclusion pulls together the various themes that emerged in the three frames, from the making of new teachers to the published literacy narratives of teachers and theorists to my own literacy narrative. Writing teachers encounter considerable pressure to align their curricula with one or another theory of literacy, which has the effect of negating the authority of knowledge about literacy gleaned from experience as readers and writers. My dissertation contends that there is much to be gained by finding ways of articulating theories of literacy that encompass teachers' knowledge of reading and writing as expressed in personal narratives of literacy. While powerful cultural rhetorics of upward social mobility often neutralize the critical potential of teachers' own narratives of literacy—potential that has been documented by scholars in writing studies and allied disciplines—this is not always the case. The chapters in this dissertation offer evidence that hopeful and critical positions on the transformational possibilities of literacy are not mutually exclusive.

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Chapter 1

Beyond Hope: Overview of Study

When I first entered the field of writing studies, I was drawn to the literacy narratives of well-known scholars, many of whom shared autobiographical accounts of their own struggles and pleasures in becoming literate, including their experiences with formal schooling. Mike Rose (*Lives on the Boundary*), Victor Villanueva (*Bootstraps*), Linda Brodkey (*Writing Permitted*), and Ira Shor (*When Students Have Power*) are just a few of the teachers whose work I read who recognized the limitations of literacy learning, oftentimes recalling their own difficulties with school, but who nevertheless imagined an alternative vision of education that mattered to students and to themselves: a vision that was empowering, relevant, and less restrictive than their own early experiences. These scholars, often from working-class backgrounds, relayed stories about literacy in which their lives, for better or worse, were changed. They were both drawn to literacy education as a career path and critical of some of the practices and effects of literacy learning. As Linda Brodkey writes:

Over the years I have thought a good deal about why I succumbed so readily to what I now recall as senseless hours of tedious exercises, distracting at best and debilitating at worst. To this day, I police my own prose with a vigilance that ought to be reserved for writers who set out to deceive, say, for spin doctors who write off the indictable crimes of their bosses as peccadilloes. (*Writing Permitted* 32)

In Brodkey's words, we see the legacy of bad pedagogical practice that endures long after schooling ends. She, like the other scholars mentioned above, came to recognize how literacy can leave a lasting and not always beneficial impression. Still, many, such as Shor, have remained committed to the possibility of change via critical literacies, to a sense of empowerment through which students might develop critical perspectives on literacy and the world. While the focus has been on developing critical citizens, a less central focus has been on helping students find employment, to develop skills per se. Such skills, of course, cannot be ignored. As Ira Shor explains in his spoken book with Freire, critical educators often are faced with the dual task of preparing both critical citizens and individuals who can survive in an unjust economic system.¹

We study standard usage and technical skills because of political realities facing students and teachers both, the fact that society is not yet an egalitarian one where elite standards no longer dominate. What we need to invent are liberatory methods which develop student command of correct usage and of job skills while encouraging them to respect their own idioms and to criticize the very nature of the unequal job-market. (72)

Related to this concern is the question of whether students *should* move up with literacy, as opposed to the other central question of whether they *can*. These two questions remain at the heart of current debates over what language(s) we want students to speak and how to best prepare them for a variety of tasks. Many of the scholars mentioned at the start of this chapter were not ready to leave the working class behind, at least not in spirit or in pedagogical practice, even if their own identities as English professors meant that they themselves had moved away from their working-class roots.

While absorbing teachers' literacy narratives as a new graduate student in writing studies, I remember reading a text that was far less hopeful. J. Elspeth Stuckey's *The Violence of Literacy* described literacy as disenfranchising; she was *not* highlighting those pockets of possibility that came up in the literacy narratives that I was reading. Her critique painted a bleak picture of writing studies, so much so that I began to question why I had entered this field. Stuckey rightly argues that literacy and economics cannot be divided:

We have seen that access to a literate economy is through education. We have seen that the arbiter of education is the test. We have seen that the test reduces to poverty or maintains in it entire segments of the economy. What we have to see, also, is how literacy is a weapon, the knife that severs the society and slices the opportunities and rights of its poorest people. (118)

As a teacher working for the City University of New York in the late 1990s, I had seen something that resembled what Stuckey had described. When I taught students who had failed the mandated Writing Assessment Test, I found myself helping them learn literacy to pass a test: a test that would be graded by others, a test that would ultimately determine whether or not a given student could stay at the four-year college. As course instructor, I invited students to consider the test as both a personal pathway to four-year college education and a gatekeeping mechanism, an instrument of social policy. Although teaching students to write short, grammatically correct essays in fifty minutes is not emblematic of my instructional style, it was what was required for success in this particular course, and I helped students master the form at the same time as I encouraged

their critical awareness of how particular writing practices performed regulatory functions at the university and beyond. Through this experience, I saw the problems Stuckey condemned; yet I still wanted to hold on to hope, a hope that I saw motivating my students.

As I look back at Stuckey's work today, I see that along with her critique, which one commentator labeled as "angry," there *was* a note of hope, a modest one that asked readers to consider the rhetorical force of literacy and its many definitions.² "To define literacy and then proceed to look for it," she writes, "is not merely to lose the possibility of discovery but to forget that those possibilities exist" (56). Educators have relied on a narrow understanding of the purpose of literacy and of school, she charges, and she calls for change—major change, in fact— to social and economic systems of power and to our definitions of literacy and schooling.

How teachers enter into conversations about the extent to which change is and is not possible is the subject of this dissertation. To answer such questions requires one to "really know" what literacy can do. But literacy stories cannot always be interpreted neatly as truth or fiction—or as myth (Graff, *Literacy Myth*). This is because narratives about literacy are rhetorical. Following John Duffy, I contend that "rhetorics of literacy" provide a way of understanding "the ways in which reading and writing can be used to define, control and circumscribe, but also the ways in which humans can use written language to turn aside, re-create, and re-imagine" (18). It is not simply one or the other. Researchers who turn to narrative inquiry are "inherently interested in details, complexities, contexts and stories of human experience of learning and teaching" (Schaafsma and Vinz 1).

In literacy narratives, we often find competing visions of what literacy is and what it does: visions that range from the mechanistic, skills-based rhetorics deployed by the teachers Brodkey reflects upon to those that equate literacy with salvation or, at the very least, upward mobility.³ This dissertation investigates the story constructions of literacy researchers and teachers who make and remake themselves (and literacy) over time, shaping their narratives to suit particular positions and situations. These stories exemplify what Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps call “living narratives,” which are embedded in history and contingent on particular circumstances. Often stories of hope, teachers’ own literacy narratives can provide what John Dewey, in 1934, called a “common faith,” a way of integrating and unifying our experiences with our ideals, seeing them as interconnected with the construction of meaning and value in everyday life, or what Paula Mathieu describes as “tactics of hope”: an orientation that questions the status quo and is grounded in a “dialectical engagement between the insufficient present and possible, alternative futures—a dialogue composed of many voices” (xv).

Not all articulations of hope are as nuanced as Dewey’s and Mathieu’s. This dissertation, in fact, begins with an argument that we need to move beyond hope. The idea of hope is rampant in the media, so prevalent that it has attracted the attention of a number of social critics, including Naomi Klein, who writes, “Whatever the last straw, a growing number of Obama enthusiasts are starting to entertain the possibility that their man is not, in fact, going to save the world if we all just hope really hard.” She continues, “This is a good thing.” Hope is just not enough. We need to move beyond hope in our understanding of possibility and, I would add, in our understanding of literacy.⁴ This does not mean simply embracing critique or identifying the myths that often undergird such

hope. The choice is more complicated than blind optimism (or naïve hope) or rigorous critique.

To go beyond hope does not mean to abandon hope. In *Pedagogy of Hope*, published in 1996, Paulo Freire laments over critical discourse that calls dreams and utopia useless (7). He describes hope as “an ontological need” (8). Yet he, too, recognizes that hope is not enough:

No, my hope is necessary, but it is not enough. Alone, it does not win. But without it, my struggle will be weak and wobbly. We need critical hope the way a fish needs unpolluted water. (8)

What makes hope “critical,” what moves it away from being merely ordinary hope, is, according to Freire, its connection to practice. What makes practice legible, and indeed what makes life experience legible, is narrative. So what does it mean to tie hope to practice to narrative when we discuss literacy and possibility?

To explore these questions, I return to those stories that first attracted me to writing studies—literacy narratives, specifically the literacy narratives of writing teachers and researchers who address the violence of literacy, who explore notions of hope, and who often rearticulate not only what it means to be literate, but also what it means to teach literacy across a host of locations. Such multiplicities have led me to explore the literacy narratives of a diverse group of writing teachers, from those beginning their careers to those who are published and widely read, with a particular emphasis on how teachers construct their own narratives of mobility, possibility, and literacy. The central questions guiding this study are: *How do teachers’ and theorists’ narratives of becoming literate intersect with literacy theories?* and *How do such literacy narratives intersect*

with beliefs in the power of literacy to improve individuals' lives socially, economically, and personally?

I ask these questions because I contend that as a field, writing studies needs to go beyond hope and also beyond critique. Rather than seeking to sever personal and affective links to literacy, this research seeks to better understand the workings of literacy narratives in the lives of a diverse group of writing teachers and theorists, many from working-class backgrounds. More specifically, it explores the ways in which teachers' literacy stories intersect with their perspectives on possibility, particularly in the lives of disenfranchised people in particular times and places. In the remainder of this chapter, I first offer an examination of the literacy myth because it inevitably surfaces in discussions about possibility and allows me to put forth an argument for exploring writing teachers' literacy narratives. Following this, I investigate rhetorics of mobility in the scholarship of working-class academics who chronicle their struggles to fit into the academy (see, for example, Dews and Law; and Shepard, McMillan, and Tate), with a particular focus on a theory of time and place (what Bakhtin calls the "chronotope"), in the construction of narratives about literacy. Lastly, I provide an overview of the subsequent dissertation chapters. In doing this, I illustrate how hope and critique fall along a continuum and highlight the myriad ways in which writing teachers, primarily college writing teachers, navigate between the two. Through literacy narratives, we learn not only the investments that individuals make in literacy, but also the complicated ways in which they define literacy and link it to notions of possibility. At a time when the humanities are under persistent scrutiny, we need to find more nuanced ways to talk about literacy and what it offers, if only sometimes.

Versions of Literacy: The Critical, the Possible, and the Mythic

A central reason for looking at the literacy narratives of writing teachers and theorists is to better understand why, thirty years after Harvey Graff published *The Literacy Myth*, literacy myths persist. For three decades, discourses on literacy education have oscillated between two competing views: one that argues that literacy is the catalyst for significant social change, and another that argues such beliefs are naïve. Graff's influential text challenged those who believed too much in literacy's potential to solve all sorts of social and economic problems. Literacy myths are associated with a belief, as Graff and Duffy describe it, that the acquisition of literacy is "a necessary precursor" that "invariably results in economic development, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement, and upward social mobility" (41). In his 1979 study of three commercial cities in mid-nineteenth-century Canada, Graff meticulously assembled evidence that showed the wrongness, or injustice, of assuming that literacy was the cure-all—the panacea for society's, or people's, ills. Since that time, literacy researchers (see, for example, Collins & Blot; Gee, *Social Linguistics*; and Street *Literacy*, among others) have argued against grand narratives of an enduring literacy crisis and the need for a common curriculum (Hirsch et al., *Cultural Literacy*; and Hirsch, *The Making of Americans*).⁵ They instead direct our attention to the variety of literacy skills situated within a range of activities inside and outside of schools.

Starting in the 1980s and continuing through the present day, literacy researchers have learned to be "wary of accepting the uniform model of literacy that tends to be purveyed with the modern nation-state" (Street, "The New Literacy Studies" 430). Along with Graff, these scholars argue for greater attention to situated literacies and dismiss

grand narratives about literacy as an independent force that ensures economic gain. So powerful has this shift in thinking been that, in 1988, James Paul Gee wrote that “at least in academic circles, the literacy myth is on its last leg” (“Legacies” 196). Two decades later, however, we have learned how intractable and somewhat elusive literacy myths really are.

If anyone should be skeptical of literacy myths, it is those individuals who have staked their careers on cultivating critical literacies among citizens of disenfranchised communities. Yet, skeptical or not, those invested in critical literacy cannot themselves avoid investment in what appear to be literacy myths. As educators imagine new communities, new classrooms, and new literacies, their stories inevitably bring together the imagined, the possible, and the mythic. This is especially true when they speculate about what literacy might afford rather than about what it has already accomplished. In such cases, educators are judged as to whether or not their stories are plausible, or at least possible; untangling the possible from the mythically improbable is no easy matter. Still, even when educators tell literacy stories about the past, their narratives often reflect affective dispositions that make them difficult to reduce to true or false statements about literacy. Because literacy stories inevitably narrate moments that are unverifiable, we may encounter signs of what *appear* to be literacy myths. (I emphasize *appear* because definitions of literacy and literate practice are not transparent—and neither are definitions of literacy myths.) Therefore, identifying literacy myths is far more complicated than has been previously acknowledged.

The idea of literacy myths typically has been used to critique those who are insensitive to social and economic differences—those who place their faith in a

decontextualized ability to read and write, seeing this as paramount to all else. It has been used to critique those who proclaim crisis, who believe that the absence of a particular literacy will preclude economic advancement and a good life. In 1975, the same year Graff completed the dissertation that would evolve into *The Literacy Myth*, *Newsweek* published the now infamous article “Why Johnny Can’t Write,” which declared a literacy crisis and yet failed to acknowledge the myriad cultural and socioeconomic changes that were taking place in the 1970s within the United States (Sheils). Others, like E. D. Hirsch, Jr., a decade later, sought to address the absence of literacy with what became known as a surface-level enculturation of what every literate American ought to know (Hirsch et al., *Cultural Literacy*). Literacy myths and literacy crises, in fact, encapsulate a perennial debate over what literacy does and does not afford—as well as what it is.⁶

“Literacy has become too promiscuous,” writes historian David Vincent in assaying how “literacy” has been invoked to identify an expansive and expanding range of communicative practices, from working on computers to describing one’s emotional state (341). While conceding that the multiplicity of literacies “reflect the central conviction of the new literacy studies that literacy should be seen as just one of a diverse range of techniques for communication,” he maintains that researchers should resist this expansive redefining of literacy (342). Other scholars, too, have questioned why literacy is used to name so much. Anne Wysocki and Johndan Johnson-Eilola, for example, question the currency of the term *literacy* in digital scholarship: “When we speak of ‘technological literacy,’ then, or of ‘computer literacy’ or of ‘[fill in the blank] literacy,’ we probably mean that we wish to give others some basic, neutral, context-less set of skills whose acquisition will bring the bearer economic and social goods and privileges”

(352). In a 2008 work on ethnographic methods, Shirley Brice Heath and Brian Street use the terms *literacy* and *multimodal literacies* to distinguish written communication from systems of representation in which the written forms are “combined with oral, visual, or gestural modes” (4).

Whatever the definition, however, literacy frequently surfaces with a promise of increasing economic and social capital. Interestingly, in the famous *Newsweek* article, one writing program administrator (WPA) from the University of Illinois charged that “creative” writing teachers were shortchanging students by allowing them to work with “film, videotape, and photography,” thereby denying them the literacy skills necessary to succeed economically and professionally (Sheils). In these examples, literacy is identified as an agent that can remedy a host of social and economic problems.

Scholars in New Literacy Studies (see, for example, Barton; Barton. Hamilton, and Ivanic; Heath and Street; Street, *Literacy* and “Literacy Practices”) have argued against such depictions of literacy and have advocated for ethnographic studies that acknowledge the particular ways in which literacy is experienced and how it is situated within particular social contexts, both factors that impact the nature and consequences of literacy learning. They argue against considering literacy as an “autonomous agent,” to use Street’s term, and stress the danger of attributing agency to literacy without considering social, cultural, and historical contexts. Instead, what makes a myth, they argue, is the decontextualization of literacy and the failure to attend to close analysis of literate activity in particular settings. Indeed, subscribers to the literacy myth are often those who subscribe to an autonomous model of literacy, variously defined, and who fail

to see the endless ways in which literacy is experienced across history and across contexts (see, for example, Bizzell; and Street, *Literacy*, for an analysis of this position).

Still, the turn toward the particular does not exclude the work of myth. In advancing literacy practices as a key framework for studying literacy, Brian Street writes, “Literacy practices incorporate not only ‘literacy events,’ as empirical occasions to which literacy is integral, but also ‘folk models’ of those events and the ideological preconceptions that underpin them” (“Literacy Practices” 61). The weaving together of “folk models” with issues of power, culture, and even technical skills in the ideological model poses rich challenges for literacy researchers attempting to extract the myth from understandings of literacy. More specifically, it poses challenges in how we interpret narrative accounts. Literacy can assume symbolic power, too, and, as Morris Young puts it, “acquiring literacy makes for a good story as our culture values the rags-to-riches fable of individual achievement through self-education and hard work” (25). This “rags-to-riches fable” goes hand in hand with stories of the literacy myth and is necessary for understanding the ideological factors of literacy.

Because ideological factors are subject to interpretation, the resulting understandings of literacy are also open to interpretation. Put another way, the myths of literacy are often deeply embedded in everyday tellings, in personal and political dramas, although they are not always easy to see. Anne Haas Dyson and Celia Genishi illustrate in their study of qualitative research methods that the line between the real and the imagined is not easily discernable and cannot be separated from social context (*On the Case* 18).

Definitions of literacy are awash with highly personal stories, imaginings, and mythologies that warrant closer attention. Similarly, Sylvia Scribner, in her well-known essay, “Literacy in Three Metaphors,” suggests “the need for understanding the great variety of beliefs and aspirations that various people have developed toward literacy in their particular historical and current life circumstances” (17). If we suspect that the literacy myth is being enacted in a particular case, we need to ask what makes this so—what definition of literacy informs this person’s beliefs.

When people think of the literacy myth, they often think of those who claim a rigid link between literacy and upward mobility. One of Graff’s most forceful findings was that this link is not always truly present. By closely examining census data about literacy rates and incomes, Graff demonstrated that literacy did not always lead to economic advancement: “Literacy...did not universally serve to benefit all who had attained it,” he tells us, “but neither did it disadvantage all those who had not” (*Literacy Myth* 19). This idea has shocked the many who have believed otherwise. Graff and other researchers have worked tirelessly to combat claims of a rigid connection between literacy and economic advancement.

When Graff, with Brian Street, took Stan Jones, one of the authors of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), to task for re-articulating the claim that literacy equaled upward mobility, Jones resisted and argued that Graff’s and Street’s “advice [was] dangerous because it could lead policy makers to believe that investments in literacy [were] not important” (20). Literacy might not have paid in a particular nineteenth-century setting, Jones suggested, but it certainly pays now: “[W]hatever the relationship between literacy and economic success over 100 years ago, the relationship

in the 1990s is real and important” (20). In 2010, Graff attempted to correct what he saw as a misreading of his work, writing that, “Never did Street or I claim that there was no relationship between, in Jones’s words, literacy and economic success, income and literacy skill, labor force attainment and literacy, and occupational change and literacy” (“The Literacy Myth at Thirty” 639).⁷ The debate continues, in part because of the various definitions of literacy and because of the tendency not to acknowledge the affective investments made in literacy and its potential across historical contexts.

A lack of historical awareness, Vincent argues, is in fact part of the problem, and is an obstacle that is encountered by teachers. Teacher preparation courses, he reasons, are so concentrated on the present moment that they produce teachers who tend *not* to look beyond their own classrooms, thereby perpetuating the literacy myth. I quote Vincent at length to show how he builds his case against classroom teachers:

Harvey Graff’s iconoclastic *Literacy Myth* of 1979 was in part directed at the prevailing optimism of educationalists who held unrealistic views of the transformative effect of learning to read and write. His work has had a dual legacy. His findings, and those of others who followed in his footsteps, have opened up a new field of historical research which has greatly enriched the discipline of literacy studies, and built creative links with adjacent fields in the social sciences. But the cumulative effect of this work on those who educate the children of these historians has been negligible. The myth of literacy has been embedded in ever-more powerful, and expensive, structures of pedagogic authority. The

lack of communication between the historians and the instructors
of written communication is almost total. (348)

Vincent presents the problem as one of a lack of historical awareness. If only teachers learned history, he suggests, they would know better. In contrast to Vincent's charge, I tend to think that writing teachers are not, by and large, victims who lack historical awareness, but rather individuals who are professionally committed to imagining value in their work. If their beliefs are overstated, the reasons for this are likely more complex than their simply not knowing the "legacies of literacy," as Graff describes them (Graff, *Legacies*). Instead, the reasons are likely connected to the larger question of why we teach literacy at all, and to the multiple and sometimes competing definitions that are attached to literacy. Moreover, the "space between literacy myth and literacy hope" has generated much debate about what literacy has done and what it can do in the future (Daniell and Mortensen). For writing teachers, insight into this debate comes from many sources, including teachers' own literacy narratives, which often feature long journeys and life changes in which education plays a pivotal role.

To believe in literacy myths is to carry the stigma of being uncritical, a stigma that scholars and teachers in literacy studies, as well as those in writing studies, have worked hard to avoid. Typically, the term *literacy myth* has been used to critique those who simply do not appreciate situated literacy practices as advanced by scholars in New Literacy Studies. The term has been used to critique large-scale literacy initiatives that have discounted the turn toward the particular (see, for example, Street "Literacy, Economy"; and Graff "Persisting"). Yet it has also been used to charge writing teachers with possessing overzealous beliefs in the power of literacy.

Nearly twenty-five years ago, in a *College English* review essay, Deborah Brandt suggested that the faith with which we attempt to engage students in reading and writing might be informed by a belief in the literacy myth: “This idea that literacy can impress its (mostly beneficial) essence upon people,” she writes, “lies behind the hopes of international literacy efforts and, most likely, behind the persistence with which we as teachers attempt to engage students in reading and writing” (“Versions of Literacy” 130). Writing about Graff’s historical study, she remarks on the “quite tenuous connections between attaining literacy skills and, for instance, increasing economic status. (Either could happen readily without the other)” (130). In drawing on historical research, through Graff, Brandt shows the folly of assuming any rigid connection between literacy and its various promises and provides a subtle critique of the beliefs of writing teachers. The problem, as she presents it, is that teachers believe too much in literacy—they believe literacy will do more than it really can. But what are the consequences of teachers’ believing too much in literacy, variously defined? What are the consequence of believing in “real-life” accounts like Erin Gruwell’s story as told in *The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and a 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them*, or in more scholarly realistic accounts like Jeffrey Grabill’s *Writing Community Change*? Disabusing the idealistic teacher of naïve hopes may be the least of our problems in actual practice, for although teachers may love stories like Gruwell’s, there is hardly a direct connection between this story and most teachers’ practices. In the next section, I take a look at responses to the movie *Precious* to explore the multiple ways in which this narrative has read literacy.

Precious Literacy: Literacy Narratives and the Durability of Mobility

In a 2010 discussion of the movie *Precious*, based on the book *Push* by Sapphire, Ishmael Reed raises two issues central to literacy studies: first, the persistence of narratives of redemption through learning the ways of white culture, and second, the inability of literacy to pull people up when they are facing enormous personal obstacles. “By the movie’s end,” he writes, “Precious [the movie’s main character] may be pushing toward literacy. But she is jobless, saddled with two children, one of whom has Down syndrome, and she’s learned that she has AIDS.” Literacy can only do so much. Echoing Graff’s sentiment, Reed demonstrates how this narrative continues to celebrate literacy while the actual plot demonstrates literacy’s limitations.

Despite literacy’s ability to secure Precious a job, the movie nonetheless provides a narrative about the power of literacy and teaching. After Barbara Bush, the former First Lady, saw it, *Precious* was viewed as a narrative that celebrated the power of education:

Precious is the story of an illiterate African-American teenager growing up in poverty in the 1980s. The abuse—sexual, physical, mental—this young woman suffers at the hands of her parents is difficult to watch; there are times when her hopelessness is overwhelming. But what saves her from a life of despair is a teacher who helps her learn to read and write.

Bush is “energized” by the film, and it leads her to see her commitment to literacy initiatives as all the more important. Learning to read and write, she contends along with many others, matters, and matters dearly. When nothing else is left, literacy enters to support uprisings, class crossings, and cultural assimilation.

But is it literacy or is it the teacher? Consider this passage from the book *Push*, in which Precious writes,

You know how you write to teacher 'n she write back to you in the same journal book like you talkin' on paper and you could SEE your talk coming back to you when the teacher answer you back. I mean what had made me really like writing in the beginning, knowing my teacher gonna write me back when I talk to her. (94)

Precious is not writing about some decontextualized literacy, but rather about the ability to communicate with her teacher, to essentially have someone listen to her. I would suggest that it is this connection that allows some readers to embrace *Precious* as a success story, almost to the exclusion of the very real material conditions that Precious faces, and the racial implications of such stories.

“Redemption narratives with literacy have a long history in Hollywood,” Reed notes, tracing their lineage to early works like those of D. W. Griffith and through more recent tellings such as *Dangerous Minds*, “where black and Latino students are rescued by a curriculum that doesn’t include a single black or Latino writer.” Movies such as these powerfully reproduce dominant representations of literacy that can easily escape our scrutiny. Rather than reproducing alternative representations of literacy, as Bronwyn Williams and Amber Zenger note, these films reproduce prevailing “conceptions so seamlessly, and often in ways that escape our explicit attention” (5).

Still, we know that such stories are not confined to film or to popular culture. Instead, they are part of academic conversations as well, and even literary ones, as was the basis for the film *Precious* (Sapphire). Whether they are taken from literature, film

and television, or scholarly publications, literacy narratives offer a reservoir of ready-made stories about the power of literacy to improve individuals' lives. Often featuring dramatic stories about successful students and teachers, literacy narratives are directly or indirectly linked to moments of transformation. They can be expressed in a passing remark or be the focus of full-length works.

When Janet Carey Eldred and Peter Mortensen introduced the term "literacy narratives" in 1992 in *College English*, they were interested in how literacy studies might enhance the study of literature. "When we read for literacy narratives," they write, "we study how the text constructs a character's ongoing, social process of language acquisition" (512). The complexity of literary accounts of literacy such as Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* can "challenge and affirm culturally scripted ideas about literacy" (513). The disciplinary knowledge of literacy studies, they contend, can contribute to the study of literary narratives and can also inspire consideration of thorny questions about the specific benefits of literacy and education across contexts, such as "What if education does not necessarily mean advancement? What if more education does not necessarily mean better lives?" (517) At first, it might be tempting to classify this problem along political lines: Some people, like Bush, hold onto naïve claims about literacy's power, while scholars like Reed do not. But it is more complicated than that.

Writing studies instructors have been "inspired by a certain kind of disciplinary romance," write Eldred and Mortensen, a need to demonstrate the merit and critical necessity of our work, not unlike the way in which the field of medicine focuses on saving lives (515). In this way, literacy becomes the marker, used in different contexts, that determines who gains access to job opportunities and cultural capital. We also know

that teachers in such narratives often assume the role of savior in their own modest and sometimes not-so-modest ways. In 2006, when Eldred and Mortensen revisited their work on literacy narratives, they noted how the term had gained traction and had become synonymous with the numerous autobiographical essays assigned in first-year composition classes. Across the country, students in composition classrooms are asked to compose their own literacy narratives and are often given readings from authors such as Richard Rodriguez, Mike Rose, Helen Keller, Richard Wright, Frederick Douglass, and Amy Tan, each one speaking in his or her own way to the power of literacy (see, for example Belasco; and Bishop), each author telling of his or her own winding journey through schools, cities, and books.⁸ However, when students write such stories, there is no guarantee that their work will explore the complexities of language acquisition—nor is there any guarantee that they will consider the dilemmas brought to light by the authors they study.

This dissertation argues that study of teachers' literacy narratives illustrates the oftentimes contradictory ways in which writing teachers negotiate their own stories with what they see as possible for themselves and their students, and the tension of these negotiations. It argues that we need to do more than celebrate or critique and must instead explore the nuanced ways teachers make meaning. Doing so can contribute to better articulating the value of our work and the possibilities that may exist. In teacher education research, scholars such as Janet Alsup and Deborah Britzman have argued that we need to attend to the stories of new teachers, what Alsup called “borderland discourses”—those autobiographical accounts that extend beyond the traditional boundaries of what is typically covered in teacher education training (*Teacher Identity* 5).

If we want to better understand teachers' beliefs, we can explore their literacy narratives and, more broadly, their autobiographies. This is because such stories are subject to interpretation and cannot always be checked for accuracy by outsiders.

Teachers' Literacy Narratives and Border Crossings

What does literacy mean to literacy educators from the working class? This question is explored in numerous autobiographical accounts in which literacy becomes a vehicle that transports the individual from a working-class home to the academy. Often, academics and rhetoricians from working-class backgrounds write of their struggles to fit into the academy, describing how fitting in can mean keeping silent about their working-class roots and how difficult it can be to return to their home communities. In such narratives (see edited collections by Dews and Law; and Shepard, McMillan, and Tate), literacy may not always be cause for celebration but it is consequential, for in these narratives, it changes lives—in some ways for the better, in some ways for the worse. This dissertation focuses on such narratives, as related by literacy teachers and theorists from working-class backgrounds.

Literacy educators and theorists place themselves in a vulnerable position when they tell stories about literacy's changing lives for the better. Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, for example, poignantly describes the long journey he took and the role that literacy and mentors played in that journey. Despite his sharp critique of the educational system, Rose's narrative never loses its connection to a sense of possibility; it is this sense of possibility that has led some to charge Rose with enacting the literacy myth and

thereby perpetuating a false understanding of what literacy can do, which I address in chapter 3.

Moreover, over time, educators' own understanding of their stories may change, as was the case for Marianna Torgovnick. When *Crossing Ocean Parkway* was published in 1994, it generated much commentary about the author's identity. Originally subtitled *Readings by an Italian American Daughter*, the book lost the subtitle when the paperback edition was published and the preface changed. Reflecting on this change, Torgovnick wrote, "I told myself that the book was about crossing between cultures. I told myself that I dropped *Readings by an Italian American Daughter* because the book was not intended just for Italian Americans or women and the subtitle might limit the mixed readership I especially enjoyed. I told myself the truth" (245). What was more, Torgovnick recognized that this change reflected changes she had gone through in the process of composing the book, and with this recognition came "a deepening of ambivalence" (245).

Torgovnick's ambivalence about the multiple identities she assumes and her concern about how those identities are received by others underscore a central concern in literacy studies that involves the extent to which students and teachers undergo change as they move into locations new to them, including the academy. Often such crossings are judged based on whether or not the journey was necessary and the extent to which an individual loses or retains some notion of his or her "real" self. But, as scholars of identity have noted (Alsup, *Teacher Identity*; LeCourt; Newkirk), identities are far more complicated than the "two worlds" metaphor that occasionally surfaces in studies of literacy crossings. Moreover, when one of these narratives ends with the teacher

reflecting on the past, oftentimes many years after the initial publication, we can see changes in the teacher's thinking, even ambivalence about who he or she is and what literacy has done in his or her life.

Methodology and Overview of Dissertation

Building on generative work on narrative constructions from scholars such as Bakhtin, Bruner; and S. Smith and Watson, I study literacy stories in three overarching narrative frames, each making visible the intersections between theories, ethical stances, and the literate lives of teachers. I have found it useful to think about literacy narratives in terms of Bakhtin's notion of the *chronotope*; that is, as fusions of time and space using typified narrative constructions (*Dialogic*). Bakhtin uses this term to analyze recurring tropes in novelistic discourse, but it has also found expression in the work of numerous literacy researchers. Because the narratives in this dissertation are from working-class academics, it is critical to analyze representations of time and place and the notions of mobility that occur as the academic moves materially and psychologically from one location to another. "A rhetoric of real places (were we to develop one)," writes Linda Flower, "would describe how writing is not merely situated in and shaped by its time and place, but how the writer's sense of that time and place is the source of meanings, motivations, and identities" (*City Comp* ix). Along with Flower, scholars such as Nedra Reynolds; Bruce McComiskey and Cynthia Ryan; and Eli Goldblatt have explored the material and metaphoric role that space plays in the way we write and represent writing.

The first of this dissertation's three narrative frames begins within a preservice classroom in which teachers were in the process of becoming professionalized and were

increasingly exposed to theoretical positions on literacy (Frame 1: Literacy Across Theory: The Making of Teachers). Another frame is that of exploration of teachers' published literacy narratives, influential texts that speak to other teachers (Frame 2: Teachers as Subjects and Theorists: Voices from Published Texts). The last probes my own experiences with literacy, first as an undergraduate and later teaching an upper-level writing course at a men's prison (Frame 3: Literacy and Personal History: Into the Prison Classroom). These frames bring together ethnographic research methods with narrative analyses of data obtained both qualitatively and from published literacy narratives. Because of the variations in methodology in each chapter (and frame), methodology will be further explained in specific chapters. The following is an elaboration of each frame along with a discussion of each chapter.

Frame 1: Literacy Across Theory: The Making of Teachers

How do the lives of beginning teachers align with the theories they study? This first frame, and my second chapter, consists of a qualitative study of future secondary education English teachers in a course focused on theories of language and literacy. The study examines how preservice English teachers' narratives of becoming literate and teaching English connect—or do not connect—with theoretical positions, and how these stories inform their ethical stances towards teaching and their future work as practitioners. I chose this class of preservice teachers because it offered a picture of new teachers at an early point in their careers, during a period when prospective teachers often encounter theoretical knowledge about literacy for the first time. Researching this scene of learning is significant because, as F. Michael Connelly and D. Jean Clandinin suggest,

practitioners can often feel excluded from the research process and may find it difficult to find space to tell their own stories amidst theoretical positions (4). In asking how preservice English teachers negotiate their literate lives with the literacy theories that they encounter in class, I aimed to reveal moments of disjuncture, as expressed in class discussion and in one-on-one interviews when theories failed to align with the teachers' understandings. For this class of fifteen women and two men, I observed and audio recorded all class meetings and looked for moments when the preservice English teachers drew on their own literacy stories and discussed them in connection with, and sometimes in contrast to, theories taught in class. I also worked to understand how the teachers relied on their own literacy narratives both to support and to critique theoretical positions.

I also asked for volunteers who would share their writings and participate in comprehensive interviews. I collected writing samples, which included response papers as well as application essays submitted to the English Education program at the university, from eight students in the course. These participants also each produced two drawings, similar to the methodology described by Alsup in *Teacher Identity Discourses*—one in which they depicted a particular experience from their own schooling, and one that represented how they imagined themselves in their future teaching. I found that the teachers did not see literacy as the great equalizer for *all* students. Rather than simply subscribing to a singular optimistic notion of literacy, the focal preservice teachers in this analysis were sometimes optimistic about their own literacy learning, but less so about the prospect that literacy could improve life for students in underserved schools. They also did not always see classrooms as spaces where literacy could impact students' lives in material ways. These preliminary findings

are significant because they illustrate how notions of possibility do not necessarily extend across contexts. The predominantly white, middle-class group of teachers saw possibilities in their own life trajectories as related to literacy, but tended not to see possibilities involving literacy for those students who inhabited social spaces in which they had been conspicuously disempowered.

Frame 2: Teachers as Subjects and Theorists: Voices from Published Texts

In this frame, which consists of chapters three and four, I analyze the narratives of influential literacy teachers and theorists who put forth an agenda that emphasizes possibilities that arise from literacy, examining how they negotiate the relationship between their own literacy stories and theories of literacy. Specifically, I investigate the narratives of three proponents of critical literacy: Mike Rose, Myles Horton, and Paulo Freire. All are highly respected literacy teachers who rose from beginnings in poverty to a commitment to teaching in disenfranchised communities.

In my third chapter, I consider Mike Rose's 1989 autobiographical text *Lives on the Boundary*. This widely read text by a respected literacy teacher and theorist suggests that literacy can be empowering, while also sharply depicting some of its failings. I will begin with a comprehensive history of how this text was reviewed by other teachers in professional and practitioner journals. In published accounts, readers have offered multiple interpretations of what this text says about the role of literacy as it pertains to the teacher. My findings suggest that some teachers and researchers have difficulty telling stories of hope, perhaps in part because they fear that their telling such stories will be interpreted as their taking an uncritical stance. Interspersed with my analysis are three

case studies that inquire into the personal connections that writing teachers make with *Lives on the Boundary*. Participants, who provided written responses and participated in audio-recorded follow-up interviews, were asked to compare Rose's story to their own stories, considering how their own literacy histories influenced their teaching. While the participants generally found Rose's story resonant with their own experiences and hopes, those teachers who were most immersed in theories of literacy were hesitant to support Rose's notion of the potential for literacy to change lives. These findings, again, suggest a tension between personal literacy histories and literacy theories.

In my fourth chapter, I draw on the published narratives of Myles Horton and Paulo Freire in their 1990 collaborative spoken book, *We Make the Road by Walking*, a dialogue on education, literacy, and social change. I chose this text because it explicitly juxtaposes the lives of these teachers with their theories. Central to my analysis are Horton's and Freire's stories about their formative years, including their own primary and secondary education experiences. Through research using archives from the Wisconsin Historical Society related to the book's production, I searched for the connections between the men's lives and their theories and explored the extent to which both they and others involved in the production of the book encouraged or discouraged the explicit acknowledgment of these connections. My findings suggest that in their resistance to considering theory in isolation, Horton and Freire demonstrate the importance of the affective and embodied dimensions of literacy learning and theory making. In other words, they illustrate how literacy theories are made in the emotional and personal spaces of everyday life.

Frame 3: Literacy and Personal History: Into the Prison Classroom

The final frame, and my fifth chapter, is both a reflective analysis and a qualitative study of my work at a men's medium-high security prison in the Midwest, where I conducted research and served as the instructor of an upper-level writing course, "Writing for a Change," in the spring of 2009. I was compelled to seek to understand the ways in which my personal history with literacy—as an instructor with working-class roots—and engagement with theory might intersect with my experiences teaching a class of fourteen men (ten African-Americans, two Latinos, and two Caucasians) in this constrained and racially conscious environment. However motivated they might be, these students lacked connections to the literacies, people, and situations that would allow them to rewrite themselves as citizens in an ever-changing world.

I also chose to include the prison course in my study for personal reasons. My father, an alcoholic, spent many years in prison for various crimes. Until I was ten, my primary contact with him was through letters he wrote while serving time. I remember wondering, as I read his letters, how this man who had committed such serious crimes could seem so kind, so human. As an adult, while following the fourteen men in this course, collecting their writings, and taking field notes during and after each class meeting over the course of the semester, I also took reflective notes on my own experiences with literacy, both in connection with my father and as linked to the theories that I was studying in my professional work.

Finally, in my conclusion, I offer some final observations. In documenting the particular ways in which teachers' stories about literacy, even seemingly mythic ones, are enacted in real contexts, this dissertation aims to identify the benefits of embracing a

more expansive view of teachers' thinking about the power of literacy. Too often, as other research has shown (Alsup, *Teacher Identity*; Britzman), teacher educators tend to draw narrow boundaries about what gets covered in their courses. In attempting to align teachers' thinking with academic theories, they often fail to acknowledge teachers' embedded assumptions about the power of reading and writing. My findings strongly suggest that we should take a different approach. We should lead teachers to explore their beliefs about literacy—and the sources of these beliefs. While it has long promised what it cannot singlehandedly deliver, literacy is nonetheless critical to the fashioning of selves and citizens, and it is nonetheless a part of individuals' efforts to amass the cultural and economic resources necessary for fulfillment and satisfaction. Through this project, my aim is to contribute to a reframing of literacy beyond the rhetoric of crisis and myth, a rhetoric that too often drowns out its generative potential and the possibility of what Linda Flower calls a "rhetoric of public engagement," a rhetoric that is so needed in the making of literacy educators (*Community Literacy*). It is a rhetoric of relevance and a tactical strategy for making and remaking possibility.

Notes

¹ Freire produced several texts in the 1980s and 1990s that he called "spoken books." These are texts in which he had a conversation with another educator, and their dialogue was recorded, transcribed, and edited. Freire's spoken book with Myles Horton is the subject of chapter 4. Other spoken books include Shor and Freire; and Freire and Faundez.

² On the back cover of *The Violence of Literacy* is this: “This is an angry book by an angry English teacher.”

³ See also Deborah Brandt’s *Literacy in American Lives* and Cynthia L. Selfe and Gail E. Hawisher’s *Literate Lives in the Information Age* for examples of researchers who have studied people’s experiences with literacy, conveyed through narrative.

⁴ See Barbara Ehrenreich’s “Pathologies of Hope” and *Bright-Sided* for a similar critique.

⁵ In a 2009 book review, Andrew Delbanco considers Hirsch’s core curriculum, as expressed in *The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools*, with Mike Rose’s attention to lives out of school in *Why School?* Delbanco finds wisdom in both perspectives and sees value in how both seem to be searching for a middle ground. He writes, “It seems to me that both these writers get a lot of things right. Both emphasize universal education for citizenship as indispensable for democracy. Both are trying to open the discourse about K-12 schools, which is badly in need of fresh air. Hirsch wants to end the standoff between left and right...and, for his part, Rose concedes that ‘standardized tests can well be part’ of responsible assessment, as long as they do not ‘overwhelm it.’” See also Hirsch’s response to Delbanco, in which he critiques the common way we discuss decline: “An ideological polarity has developed over this issue. If you say that schools have declined you must be a conservative, but if you say they haven’t you must be a liberal.” For Hirsch, the schools really have declined.

⁶ See the work of A. Bloom and Hirsch for a discussion of cultural capital and different types of literacies.

⁷ See Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz's *The Race Between Education and Technology* for a related analysis of the relationship among education, technology, and the wage structure in the United States. The authors describe an "ongoing and relentless race between technology and education" throughout the first eight decades of the twentieth century (352). "But after around 1980 the supply of educated Americans slowed considerably. The sluggish growth in the educated workforce in the last quarter century has been mainly due to a slowing down in the educational attainment of those schooled in the United States" (7).

⁸ The Digital Archives of Literacy Narratives at The Ohio State University provides a space for collecting digital literacy narratives across media:
<http://daln.osu.edu/>.

Frame 1: Literacy Across Theory, The Making of Teachers

Chapter 2

Making Teachers, Making Literacy

In a class of preservice English teachers at a university in the Midwest, Nancie Atwell's widely read *In the Middle* had created a stir. After reading two chapters—"Learning How to Teach" and "Responding to Writers and Writing"—many of the preservice English teachers questioned whether or not Atwell's pedagogy, a workshop approach in which students chose their own topics, could work for them as teachers. Their teacher, Professor Franke,⁹ assured them that Atwell's teaching had worked, and worked well, at diverse schools across the country. Still, many of the preservice teachers were skeptical. In a response essay, one student, Michael, wrote apologetically:

When we were discussing Atwell's workshop approach in class last week, I did not mean that it was a bad or meaningless approach to writing, but rather [that] it would be difficult to get every student to participate willingly, without deadlines or a 'threat' of grades looming over their heads.

Michael was not alone. As I read the responses of other preservice teachers, I recognized that other students had also questioned the feasibility or rigor of Atwell's approach.

Michael would go on to say:

If I could find a way to get *every student* to participate in writing the way Atwell does, I would gladly incorporate much of what she discusses in this [chapter] in my classroom.

But he remained unconvinced of this possibility for all students.

Just a week earlier, Michael's point that students would not be motivated to write without a "threat" found expression as the class discussed the first chapter of *In the Middle*. When it came time for the class to discuss the reading, the preservice English teachers were silent when Professor Franke attempted to begin a discussion:

Professor Franke: How would you summarize the story that Atwell here is telling in the first chapter? [10 seconds of silence.] Susan?

Susan: What? How would I summarize it?

Professor Franke: How would you summarize the story Atwell is telling in the first chapter?

Susan: I didn't read it.

Professor Franke: Okay, you wouldn't. Anybody? Christine? [Christine shakes her head.] You haven't read it? How many people have read it? [Four hands are raised.] One, two, three, four. Only four people read it. How many people have it? [Approximately half the class raises hands.] Okay, umm, obviously this isn't good. It's a little bit, you know, difficult to carry on a discussion of the readings this week when there are only four people who read them and only half the class has access to them at this point. What would you suggest we do?

Not a word was spoken for about two minutes, but it felt like much longer to me. The preservice teachers were frozen except for their moving eyes, which seemed to look everywhere but at their professor. This was the first time that Professor Franke had not assigned a response essay for the assigned reading. I strongly suspected that because the

preservice teachers were not required to submit a response for evaluation, there had been less incentive for them to read. The message the preservice teachers conveyed was that they would read when they had to turn in a response, but that without that requirement, they would be less inclined to do so.

A few minutes later, Professor Franke turned to the topic of structuring literacy with incentives and told the class this story about reading:

Has anyone ever taken social psychology and learned about undermining?
[No response.] Some social psychologists did an experiment. You can take it for what it's worth, but they found people who liked to read. They reported they loved reading stuff. And they said, "OK, that's great. What we'd like you to do now is keep track of the reading you do, and we'll give you a penny a page." Guess what happened? [No response.] They started to enjoy reading less. Previously they had already been reading because they wanted to, and now they were being paid for it.

When a payment was attached to reading, Professor Franke suggested, students wanted to read *less*, not more. I connected this example with the fact that the students did not have to write a response essay for the first Atwell reading. They were *not*, in a sense, getting credit for a written response. However, rather than being led by the lack of reward or punishment to want to read Atwell more, many of the student teachers chose not to read it.

How did the preservice teachers' own lives and experiences inform their perspectives and practices? In this chapter, to explore teachers' beliefs about literacy, I consider their own histories, often their own early histories of learning and perceiving

possibility in school; that is, I consider their literacy narratives. I consider how their stories intersected with the literacy narratives they read, such as those expressed in Atwell's *In the Middle*, as well as the literacy narratives that emerged in this preservice class.¹⁰ My reason for doing this is to illustrate the importance of encouraging teachers to integrate their personal selves with their professional selves.

Janet Alsup, drawing on the work of Deborah Britzman, has argued that teachers are often asked to suppress “aspects of their personal selves that do not conform” to cultural models or scripts (Alsup, *Teacher Identity* 41). Mary Kay Rummel and Elizabeth Quintero believe that teacher education programs need to create spaces wherein novice teachers can make their personal beliefs and images of teaching explicit (189).¹¹ Even when such aspects or beliefs challenge innovative pedagogical practice, I contend that they are nevertheless important to foreground; in fact, I believe it is critically important to create spaces for reflection, and literacy narratives provide an excellent opportunity for investigating the tensions between the narratives into which teachers are enculturated and their own personal histories. This chapter begins with a discussion of idealized teaching stories. Returning to the Atwell episode and concentrating on the preservice teachers' literacy narratives as well as interviews and drawings they created, I will then consider the connections between early experiences with school and pedagogies of possibility.

Making Teachers

Teachers' narratives exist in a cultural network containing images of teachers that range from that of the taskmaster to that of the idealized instructor. Sources of these images include teachers' own school histories, teachers from the media, and theoretical

teachers. Jerome Bruner writes of the “tyranny of the single story”—the way stories can impose “an ontological hardening on our various versions of the real world” (*Making Stories* 103).¹² Despite Bruner’s perceptive insight, I believe that it is seldom the case that there is just one singular story, one dominant narrative. Rather, there are clusters of stories that make their way into teachers’ lives and into the public imagination.¹³ Alsup, for example, describes how beginning teachers, mostly young women, often subscribe to stereotypes about teaching and do not see these as problematic (*Teacher Identity Discourses* 6-7).¹⁴ Another dominant narrative is that of the heroic male teacher whose teaching changes lives (as in, for example, *Dead Poets Society*). In the professional literature, we regularly encounter critiques of overzealous teachers who, it is implied, have perhaps seen too many movies in which a heroic teacher enters a struggling school and saves the day (see, for example, Bauer; and Weber and Mitchell, for a discussion of this type of narrative). The critical tendency, in fact, has been to dispel the naïvely idealistic beliefs of teachers. Still, other memorable teachers are not in the movies, but are teacher-researchers whose pedagogies have been taken up by many others in writing studies (see, for example, Atwell, Calkins, Freire, and Rose, to name a few), whose own stories appear remarkable, if not idealized.

But the story of the idealized teacher is not the only story that competes for our attention. The pervasive image of the teacher as taskmaster is so strong that researchers Sandra Weber and Claudia Mitchell found it hard for teachers to transcend. As one of the teachers in their study explained: “When asked to imagine or even draw a picture of a teacher, I still come up with the same figure I used to come up with when I was younger...it seems like we can’t completely rid ourselves of the traditional ways” (29).

The image of the taskmaster and his or her practices is so pervasive, in fact, that it can undermine an appreciation for alternative pedagogies and dispositions.

For some teachers, Atwell's story can serve as a reminder of what they themselves have not been able to accomplish in the classroom. In an early review of *In the Middle*, Carol Gilles wondered, "[B]y reading this book, could other teachers become like Nancie Atwell?" She concluded that this was unlikely, saying Atwell could not "be cloned." In 2006, *English Journal* carried the article "Why I Detest Nancie Atwell," in which the author, Sarah Brooks, narrated her difficulty in being *like* Atwell. "I believed her," Brooks explained, but she was disappointed that her own teaching was not so tidy as Atwell's. "[Atwell] didn't tell me it would be so messy....or did she[?]" Brooks wondered. In a similar vein, I sometimes hear colleagues say that Atwell's story is just too perfect. Despite Atwell's carefully woven and situated narrative, her story is one that many teachers have tried to emulate, or thought about emulating. It is in the process of translation that even the most situated accounts of literacy can assume mythic proportions. Along with Atwell's accounts, narratives by educators such as Mike Rose (see chapter 3) and Myles Horton and Paulo Freire (see chapter 4) have inspired many while also drawing criticism for being what are perceived as extraordinary accounts of successful teaching that cannot be matched.¹⁵ When Mark Wiley's students read *Lives on the Boundary*, for example, they felt intimidated by Rose and his pedagogical accomplishments.¹⁶

Back to Atwell: Too Utopia-like, Too Ideal

Atwell's world is "too Utopia like, too ideal," wrote Margaret in preparation for the second class meeting, for which the class had been directed to supply a written response to the assigned reading. Unstructured was the way Alice put it, expressing fear that students in Atwell's class would somehow be denied the essential skills needed for the future. I wanted to better understand how the students had come to presume this. What was it about Atwell and/or her pedagogy that they found so troubling or unrealistic?

I began this study in the fall of 2006, in a course on composition theory and practice that included seventeen preservice English teachers (fifteen women and two men). The course met twice a week for 75 minutes and was taught by Professor Franke, a professor in the English department who structured his course in a way that encouraged the preservice teachers to reflect on the class readings and to open up a space for discussion. In addition to selections from Atwell's work, readings included selections by a variety of scholars including Deborah Brandt, Margaret Finders, Nancy Sommers, and Anne Haas Dyson, each of whom specialized in a different aspect of writing research and teaching, from early childhood to college.

Participants were invited to share with me their course writings as well as their application essays to the Secondary English Education Program. Ten students (nine women and one man) provided written course documents; four students (three women and one man) provided copies of their application essays. Most of the preservice teachers appeared to be Caucasian with the exception of two who appeared to be of Asian descent. Many of the students in the class took courses together in the Education department, and many were also observing teachers at the local middle and high schools.

I chose this class because it allowed me to study prospective teachers at an early point in their professionalization, a point where such teachers typically are encountering new ideas about literacy and writing practices. Moreover, because the class brought together theoretical arguments and personal reflection, it provided a design that was compatible with my research agenda of studying the related investments made by these preservice teachers in literacy.

The class met on the ground floor of a 100-year-old building located on campus near a main road. The twenty-five-foot-square classroom sat on the main-road side of the building. On the outer edge of the room were three windows, which ran from near the ceiling to halfway down the wall. During the early afternoon, when this class met, it was not unusual to hear the sounds of buses passing and students chatting outside. Thirty-five chairs with desk arms were pushed to the outer edges of the room, too many to form a single circle and more than were needed for the students.

I presented myself as a graduate student conducting research on how preservice teachers made sense of literacy in their own lives and how they imagined its working in their future teaching. Specifically, I expressed an interest in understanding better how preservice teachers were acclimated to theories of literacy—that is, how theories of literacy related to their own experiences of becoming literate and teaching English to others.¹⁷

I focused particularly on Christine and Alice, who were two of the most active participants and who appeared deeply engaged with the theories of the course and their implications for classroom practice. Christine had grown up in the suburbs near a larger metropolitan city in the Midwest. Her parents had taught her to believe in the power of

literacy and, more broadly, education. She was a student who, by her own account, always received high grades. She learned early on how to identify the minimum amount of work required to get an A in her classes, which at her high school, she explained, was not very much. She wrote extensively, yet said she hated doing so. Alice had attended a renowned public high school in the Midwest, which she described as “preppy.” She was committed to helping students develop what she called “critical thinking skills.”

I conducted one hour-long interview with Christine and one with Alice at the end of the semester. The interviews, although unstructured, were guided by broad questions:

1. What role did literacy play in your early life? Do any stories stand out?
2. How do the theories of literacy and language relate to your own experiences as a reader/writer? Do you agree or disagree with particular theories?
3. What is the connection between literacy and the “American Dream” or “upward/economic mobility”?

Additionally, at the end of the one-hour interview, I asked Christine and Alice to draw on a blank sheet of paper an image of a problematic English class and then to draw a picture in which they imagined themselves in the classroom. The practice of using drawings to reflect on teaching practice was inspired by Janet Alsup’s methodology, which draws on the work of Sandra Weber and Claudia Mitchell as well as that of colleagues with whom I worked at the University of Illinois (Alsup, *Teacher Identity*; Hawisher, Prior, Berry, Buck, Gump, Holding, Lee, Olson, and Solberg; Prior and Shipka). During our interviews, Christine and Alice were given approximately ten minutes to complete their drawings, and then each spent a few minutes explaining her philosophy through

her drawings.

Literacy, Work, and the “Real World”

The preservice teachers often expressed concern over whether or not they were preparing students for the “real world”—which often meant preparing students for work, although the goal sometimes was expressed as helping students meet school deadlines. Over the semester, the preservice teachers frequently referred to literacy in relation to the “real world”; they tended to grapple with the question of what types of literacies were needed for “real” contexts. The reading for the seventh week made this connection explicit: The class was assigned a chapter, “Creating a Fit: Socializing Writers into the Community,” from Anne Beaufort’s 1990 *Writing in the Real World: Making the Transition from School to Work*, in which Beaufort describes the complex ways in which writers are socialized into particular communities and suggests that writing expertise comes from multiple domains that include “subject matter knowledge,” “genre knowledge,” “rhetorical knowledge,” and “writing process knowledge” (64). Beaufort includes an account of Pam, a writer who gets caught up in the collaborative process of workplace communication. In Alice’s response to this reading, she critiqued the socializing forces that can make a piece of writing feel other than like one’s own. As she explained:

A person may be learning how to write better for [one] particular task[;]
however, the writing [becomes no longer] theirs because it goes through
so many stages of socializing with other writers or experts.

Alice described the “stages of socializing” as depriving writers of their own productions. Her statement echoed the tension between the personal and the social that dominated writing studies scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s (see, for example, Elbow; and Berlin), but with a significant difference: Alice imagined the socializing of writing as an occasion not to promote critical consciousness, but rather to meet the demands of an employer. In the last line of her response essay, she asked, “But why then does the company want [the student] to develop her writing and put her own mark on it if the materials are to be formal proposals and such?” Her question described a conflict between the company’s requirements and the writer’s creativity. Alice’s reading of Beaufort’s chapter complicated her mantra to teach “writing for the real world.” For Alice, writing for work could mean giving up ownership of one’s writing to “the company”—at least early on, she reasoned, before the writer could express what she wants to write without relying on others.

In Alice’s articulation, Pam’s writing was sacrificed to the company, who took ownership of her “mark.” For the preservice teachers, this idea about writing also extended to school, where they discussed writing for the purpose of receiving grades. While we might say that writing is often, if not always, a social activity, the quality of that social experience is nevertheless varied. For preservice teachers such as Alice and Christine, getting good grades was the norm, especially in writing classes. They knew what work was expected—and produced it.

Yet Alice’s and Christine’s responses suggest a participation based on obligation, one that felt akin to a chore. At first, it is tempting to set up a binary between writing for others and writing for oneself. However, I believe such framing would undermine the

complexity of experience. In none of the interviews did the preservice teachers express a love for writing in their adult life, whether for social participation or for personal reflection such as journal writing.¹⁸ In a response paper late in the semester, one preservice teacher, Jane, began, “As a student in the English department...I personally despise writing papers.” A few sentences later, she wrote that this was “not a newly acquired hate,” but one that had developed through “teachers[’] neglecting and abusing the writing process.” Jane’s critique implied that if her teachers had taught writing correctly—whatever that meant—she would not have developed such a strong dislike of it.

Christine also confessed a strong dislike for writing, which led me to question her sense of self as a writer:

Patrick: Do you think you’re a good writer?

Christine: I’m hesitant to answer you because I know that I’ve given you writing samples from this class and they’re not good. But there are certain situations where I think that I am a good writer.... My problem is that I always procrastinate to the last second....

I assured Christine that my interest was not in critiquing her writing ability, that her writing was just fine. It became clear that she wrote a great deal but that, regardless of the situation or purpose, she simply did not enjoy it. As we talked more, I realized that many of these future English teachers were having similar responses to writing. How, then, I wondered, would they teach writing to future students? At one point Christine considered this very question:

Christine: I think when I'm a teacher I'm sure not going to tell my kids
that I hate writing....

Patrick: May I ask you why you wouldn't tell them that you hate writing?
Could telling them that help?

Christine: Okay...That's a good.... I would not pretend that writing is my
favorite thing, but I would present it in the most honest way that I
can which is that this is a very specific skill. I mean that...this is
one of the biggest skills they'll learn here and it is necessary.

As we continued talking, Christine expressed uncertainty as to the type of teacher she wanted to become and the way she would discuss writing with her students. To Christine, writing was something every student needed to do; it just was not fun. This view of writing is one that I have frequently observed in my work with a National Writing Project site; often teachers come to the Summer Institute with a dislike for writing. Anne Gere recalls interviewing an applicant for her first Summer Institute who was less than receptive “at the prospect of spending time on her own writing” (1). Gere writes:

I tried, with as much assurance as a new director can muster, to amplify
the cliché that teachers of writing should themselves write. I talked about
the need for teachers to experience first-hand what they require of their
students, about the hypocrisy of urging others to participate in an activity
in which one does not share, about the fact that she might actually enjoy
writing. She nodded politely.

Gere's story ends with the woman's being “converted” after attending a Summer Institute with a National Writing Project site—with her having the need to write, and discovering

topics that were important to her that she did not recognize at the outset. I have seen similar, though less dramatic, transformations—but far less often in a typical class at the university, and even less often in required classes. Gere rightly notes that this type of “transformation” is a central accomplishment of the National Writing Project.¹⁹

Rhetorics of Mobility and a Literacy Payoff

What surprised me during my interviews with Christine and Alice was how often stories of mobility were used to narrate their own histories, but not those of their students. I met individually with them in a colleague’s office in the English building. There, one could not help but notice the volumes of books on literacy—on the bookshelves and piled high on the desk, on the meeting table, and even on the floor. On the wall was a poster of the film *Stanley and Iris*, the popular tale in which Stanley’s life is transformed by literacy; below a photograph of Jane Fonda and Robert DeNiro read the blurb “Sometimes people need love spelled out for them.” The space, I thought, offered a concentrated picture of the pervasive nature of cultural narratives about literacy.

When I met with Christine, we talked about her parents’ and grandparents’ beliefs in literacy. Her grandparents had come to the United States from Korea when her mother was fourteen, and were very much attached to the idea that their lives and the lives of their children would be better. As Christine explained:

[T]he reason that they came here is because there are three girls in the family and my grandpa wanted them to have educational opportunities, so [my mom] came to the [university] to be a doctor.... She met my dad at the [university], and my dad is an electrical engineer. So he met her, and

she was majoring in biology, and he talked her into switching to engineering so she would get a job right out of college.

As Christine relayed her story, she constructed a tale in which literacy quite literally paid, and she described the physical and psychological journey that had been made for such advancement. Christine went on to describe how her grandfather and father had been concerned that her mother obtain the right degree. Although her mother would ultimately not pursue a career in engineering, she and her family remained invested in the idea that education was of critical importance. In fact, Christine explained that her father was disappointed that she did not pursue a degree in engineering. He saw value in this particular degree whether or not his daughter pursued a career in the field. Christine's mother, in contrast, was less concerned that she pursue a degree in engineering.

When I asked Christine if she believed that education had really given her and her family a good life, she replied:

Yeah, I think so, and I think that it's like it just keeps going on and on. I think they worked hard in order to have enough money to have the kind of means that would facilitate myself and my brother [having] good educational experiences. Also...I don't mean to make it all about money, but you know what I mean...[for us] to be more successful than them.

I was struck by Christine's awareness that her story had turned to issues of money—although, as she said, she did not want to “make it all about money.” This value, or projected value, was one that Christine readily applied to her own family narrative; it was, however, less pronounced in her stories of teaching and the possibilities of teaching. She, like many of her classmates, questioned what literacy and a college education could

really do. She remained an advocate while recognizing that some students might not pursue a college education or ultimately achieve the same level of success that she had achieved.

However, elsewhere, in her application essay to the English Education program, Christine did describe a successful effort tutoring a freshman—a success that had resulted in higher grades for him. She wrote, “The satisfaction on my tutee’s face when he received his improved grades was rewarding to me beyond description.” While the payoff in this narrative is more modest than that expressed in Christine’s narrative about her family, it is one that is focused on the benefit of getting good grades. In Christina’s personal narrative, she emphasized the relationship between education, literacy, and a better life, which is no doubt connected to the achievement of good grades, among other factors. In describing her tutee, she was more modest in articulating notions of possibility for a better life through literacy, preferring not to go beyond mentioning the benefit of good grades. This tempered response toward such possibility was also apparent when I met with Alice, who maintained a critical stance towards the mythos of the connection of working hard and schooling to success in the United States.

When Alice and I talked about her thoughts about literacy and the American Dream, she critiqued a blind faith in literacy while maintaining a modest belief in how her work could help people. She said:

I think that not being literate bars [one from opportunity], but I don’t think [literacy] is a prerequisite to being successful because there are a lot of people who can’t read [who] I’m sure are very successful, who provide a living for themselves, are happy with what they do.... I kind of think it is

very [mythologized].... The American Dream doesn't really exist.... It's just a class thing....²⁰ If you're upper middle class, you're going to have the American Dream whether you want it or not, no matter how much education you have, because you were born into it.

Alice's nuanced remarks attributed power to education and literacy without making these an absolute determinant of success—at least for marginalized students. In her view, those in the middle class and above were destined to realize the American Dream whether or not they pursued it. But for those who were not born into such privilege, there was less certainty. In her view, the absence of education and literacy could prevent those who were not part of the middle and upper class from getting ahead, but there were no guarantees. She went on to talk about the role that class played in economic opportunity and, while not seeing literacy instruction as unrelated to economic mobility, she remained unwilling to place too much faith in the power of literacy and schooling. In many ways, one might say that Alice's response is just the type of perspective we want for new teachers: a view that acknowledges possibilities, yet nevertheless remains attentive to the doubts that might exist for those from marginalized communities.

Indeed, despite Alice's skepticism about literacy's potential to accomplish much, she remained committed to helping students communicate accurately and saw her role as providing the support that they needed. For both Alice and Christine, Atwell's pedagogy was questionable because it did not provide students with what they perceived students as needing; both suggested that Atwell was too idealistic. Christine, for example, focused on what she perceived to be Atwell's lack of attention to standards and the teaching of skills. In her response essay, she wrote:

The only reason I keep using the word “standards” is that I am not sure how else to quantify/qualify the “skills, knowledge and literate values” that parents and teachers desire for their children.

The need to teach skills, especially to students from disadvantaged communities, is a recurring concern, expressed powerfully by scholars who argues for attention to the specific literacy needs of different populations.²¹

In Alice’s view, Atwell was quite simply not preparing students for the “real world”—not providing them with the skills they would need. Her discussion of the “real world” reminded me of the Beaufort reading the class had done, and Alice’s response, mentioned earlier, about issues of authorship and the desire she felt that one should maintain some ownership over one’s work. Yet, in the context of our meeting, Alice was focused on skills, as she explained in her response essay:

I see skills as something you can apply in the real world. In the real world you need to convince people of things adequately, and not by showing false information or information that cannot be supported.

Another preservice teacher, Margaret, brought up an unconventional aspect of Atwell’s pedagogy, the lack of deadlines, and suggested that this pedagogy was not for everyone:

[Atwell’s] decision to remove the deadlines from the class.... I guess there [were] some good things and bad things about that for me.... One of the good things is that for people who are actually, you know, pretty well-developed writers—they just need a little extra time to process what they’re trying to say; it’s a good thing because then they’re working to

their full potential, producing the highest-quality work they can. But on the other hand, it's like letting the students procrastinate and not taking the work as seriously, and removing the element of structure and organization...[not] preparing them for deadlines.

Margaret's response to Atwell pointed to the "well-developed writer" as someone who would benefit from Atwell's pedagogy, as someone who should be spared deadlines so that she could work to her full potential. While being somewhat open to Atwell, Margaret expressed concern about not teaching students "the importance of promptness and punctuality" in everyday life. In Margaret's view, the writing class was a place to socialize students such that they would learn to be prompt and meet requirements—those articulated in the class, and those students might encounter later in life. Still, she continued, Atwell's approach had "the potential to be just as effective [as other pedagogies], if not more." Her response suggested ambivalence toward Atwell's pedagogy: it might have potential, she thought, but she remained concerned that the development of necessary skills was being neglected by it.

Picturing Literacy

In this section, I look at how Christine and Alice narrated their stories of literacy with the help of drawings. The idea of having students explore the meaning of writing using other media is a technique that Gail Hawisher, Paul Prior, and Jody Shipka have explored in their research and practice at the University of Illinois (Hawisher, Prior, Berry, Buck, Gump, Holding, Lee, Olson, and Solberg; Prior and Shipka). In *Teacher Identity Discourses*, Janet Alsup also asks preservice teachers to create visual metaphors

as a way to trace their process of development. The purpose of doing this is to see what is communicated via image that might not have been communicated in words alone. It also provides a way of exploring how literacy is spatialized in participants' narratives and the ways in which space is represented between teachers and students.

Alsup describes how, in her study, the teachers' images often conveyed stereotypes of which the teachers were unaware. Through a discussion of the drawings, Alsup was able to help the teachers reflect on their assumptions. When Hawisher and Prior use drawings, they do so to help teachers appreciate the complicated—indeed, laminated—processes that accompany literacy learning.²²

I asked Christine and Alice to share with me a drawing that reflected memories of a problematic class and also one of how they might wish to construct their classes in the future. After about ten minutes of drawing, Christine told me she was ready and apologetically mentioned that she would need to provide much explanation about her drawings. In her image of the “worst” class (see fig. 1) , she sketched a sloped surface with four rows of students, a total of seven stick figures (not counting the teacher). Between the students and the professor were two squiggly lines that ran from the floor to the ceiling. Christine explained that this was the high school class she had observed this past semester. The students were sitting in old desks, she explained, in a room that was once a small auditorium. She pointed out how the kids were “spaced far apart” and the desks were falling apart. The squiggly lines were included to illustrate the disconnect between students and their teacher. She said that this teacher thought that he was effective, but that “the kids do not like him at all.” “I don’t think he knows about it,” she continued. “It’s probably the worst environment I’ve been in.” Importantly, Christine

identifies a pedagogical approach that does not benefit students and offers a critical reading of teacher who is unaware of the problems with his practice. This is significant because, like many (if not all) the teachers in the study, Christine was interested in becoming a good teacher and in challenging practices that she deemed unhelpful to students.

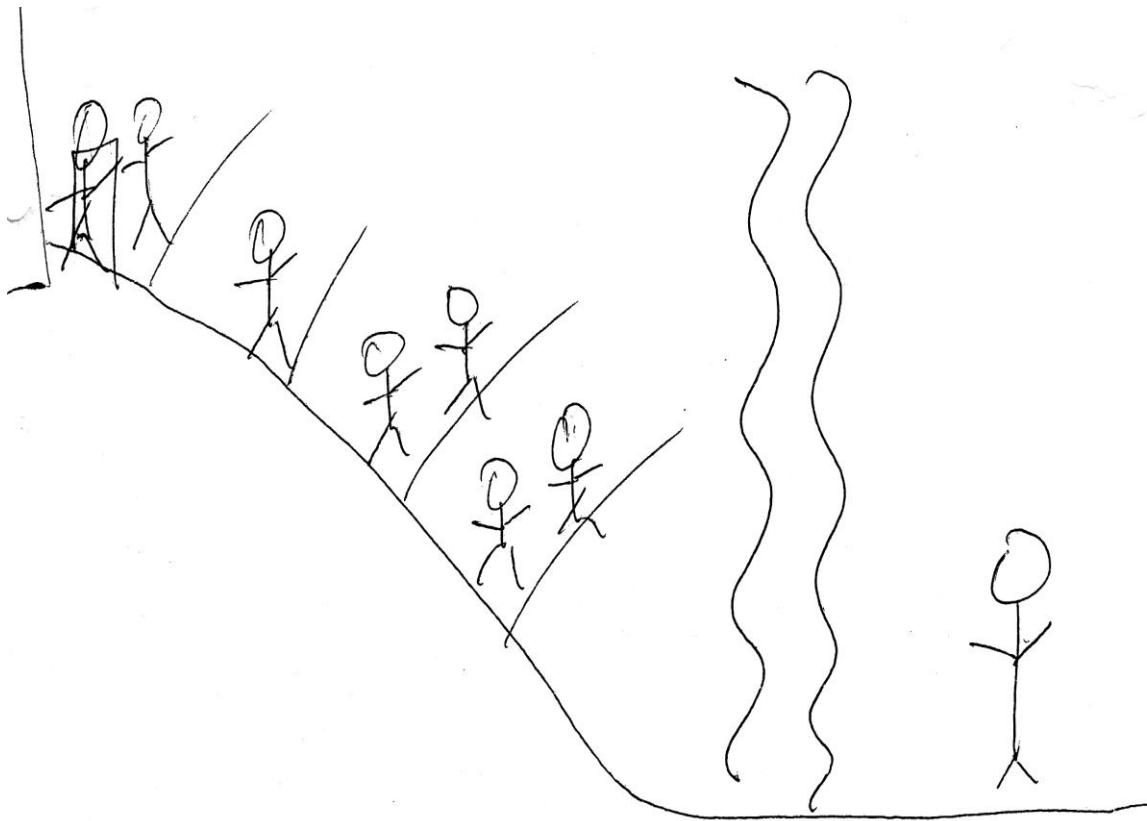


Figure 1: Christine's drawing of the "worst" class.

On the one hand, Christine's story may seem all too familiar: the unaware lecturing teacher, the bored students, and the unsatisfactory space for learning. These images have become symbolic of limited and dated teaching practices. In *Reassembling*

the Social, Bruno Latour provides a poignant example of how spatial arrangements, often taken for granted, shape activity, discussing a lecture hall with chairs bolted to the floor. While such material conditions as bolted-down chairs or even chairs in a circle do not ensure a particular response, they can impact the experience—often without the participants’ knowing it (195). In the case of the often-discussed “chairs in a circle rather than in rows,” this seating arrangement has nearly become a cliché in representing good teaching.

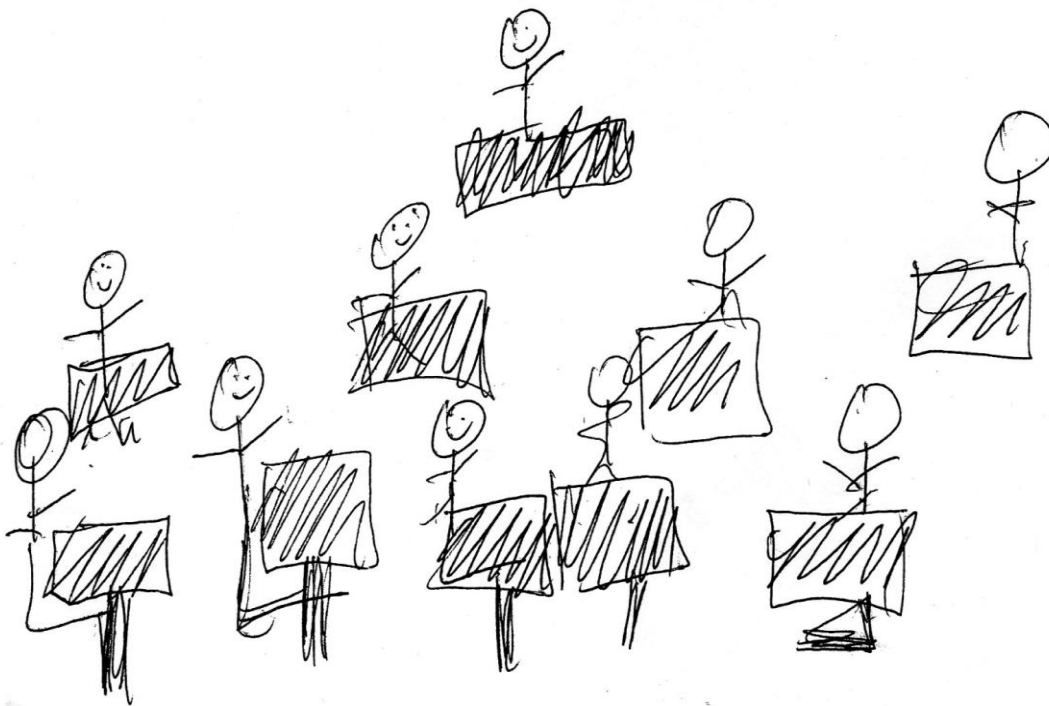


Figure 2: Christine’s drawing of the “good” class.

In figure 2, we see Christine’s drawing of the “good” class, the class she would like to have in the future. She shares an image in which it is impossible to tell the

students from the teacher. The desks are bunched together; everyone looks the same. The two of us laughed as she explained how she had begun to put a smiley face on each face, only to realize that doing so might make everyone look “drugged out.” If the first image was suggestive of a limited view of teaching, Christine’s second drawing is suggestive of a idealized account of blissful teaching. As I considered this drawing along with Christine’s early discussion of literacy and education, I was reminded of how these preservice teachers carried multiple, and sometimes incompatible, stories with them. Atwell’s pedagogy, which appeared closer to the second drawing in terms of spatial configuration, was at once attractive and unrealistic.

When Alice drew her pictures of teaching, she, too, focused on spatial arrangements. Part of the value of the drawings, in fact, was in seeing how they portrayed configurations of space—the ways in which desks were positioned as well as the position of the teacher in relation to the students. Alice said the traditional classroom reminded her of Foucault’s panopticon, referencing the rigidity of classes wherein seat assignments were routed along a highly prescribed path. As she described this rigidity, she was pounding her pencil against the desk. Interestingly, her “bad” class (see fig. 3) did not seem like a panopticon at all. It was in her imagined “good” class (see fig. 4), in fact, that Foucault’s panopticon appeared to be visually present, even though this drawing was meant to illustrate her belief in the workshop approach.

In describing her “good” class, Alice explained how her class would have games and would be fun. She told of a summer class in which students created posters from a

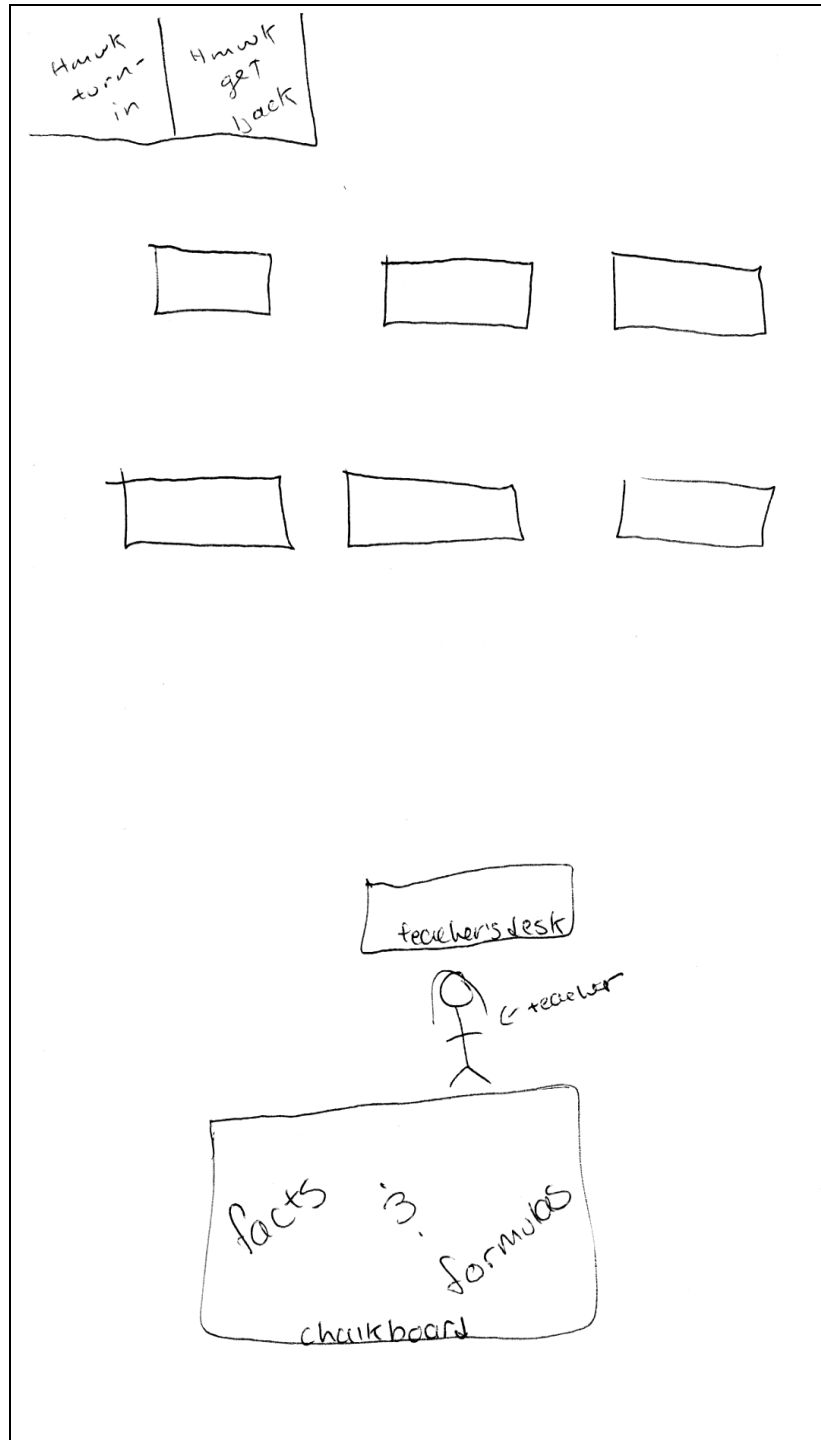


Figure 3: Alice's drawing of the "bad" class

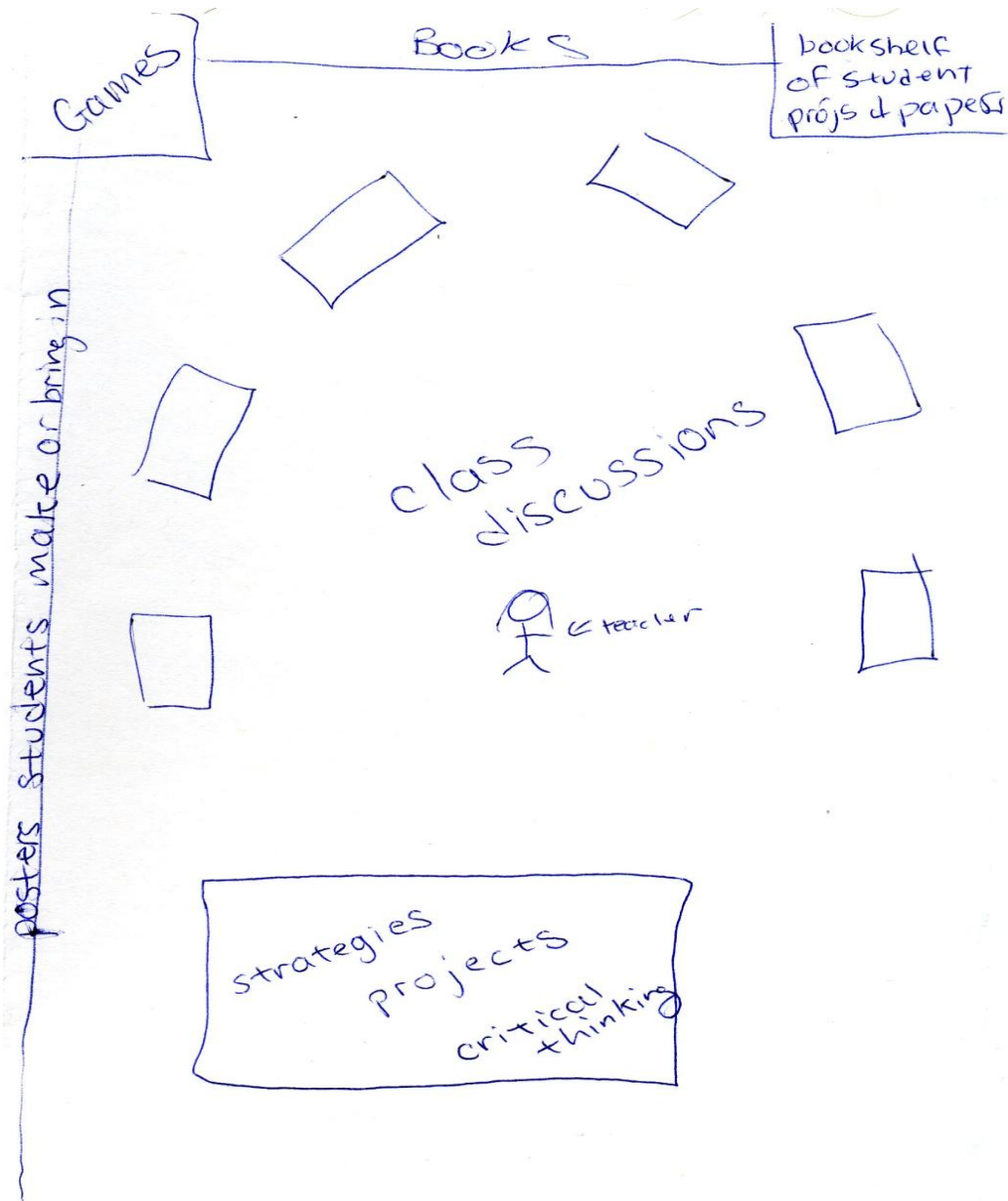


Figure 4: Alice's drawing of the "good" class.

variety of materials. She said that while she was not sure if anyone had done this before, she would like to create binders of students' work for her class to read. As I thought about this approach, I remembered how Alice and Christine had critiqued Atwell's pedagogy—and yet here, when they were describing plans for their future teaching,

there were elements that supported Atwell's pedagogy. Just as Erin Gruwell (see conclusion) did not want to see her story as just another idealistic one, I suspect that Alice and Christine did not want to see their visions that way, either. The significance of this disconnect might be related to the idea that teachers have difficulty seeing their own practice—and, perhaps more importantly, the fact that how one sees one's practice is not necessarily how others will see it. This seeming contradiction will be further examined in chapter 3, which considers teachers' responses to Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*.

Early Memories of Writing (and Teachers)

One of the few times when the student teachers discussed writing as a pleasant experience was when they talked about their childhoods. During the second week of class, the future teachers were discussing Brandt's article "Remembering Writing, Remembering Reading," first in small groups and then as a class, and the conversation included a discussion of early memories of reading and writing. One of the preservice teachers, Margaret, felt that Brandt had placed too much emphasis on the parents and not enough on the role that older siblings can play in guiding younger siblings towards learning to read and write. She emphasized, "Even if it's just playing school, even if it's just...."

Professor Franke, speaking to the class, said, "How many people played school [as children]?" Nearly every hand was raised. "There's a lot of teachers in the room," he said. Many students laughed. This moment of camaraderie was built on the idea that an interest in teaching runs deep, and that most of the soon-to-be teachers had thought about teaching for a long time and had even played teacher as children.

When I met with Alice at the end of the semester, we sat at a round table and talked about her experiences with literacy and her plans for teaching. Halfway through the interview, I asked Alice when she had first known that she wanted to become a teacher:

Alice: I was, like, seven (laughing)

Patrick: Since you were seven...

Alice: I remember my sister when she was two, and we'd be sitting at her Fisher- Price vanity desk and I'd be on the other side and, like, "Okay, we're going to read this, blah blah blah blah." So my sister learned to read when she was like three or four [laughing]; we'd have school every day [laughing]. We had nothing else to do.

The laughter that punctuated Alice's sentences suggested her pride in having taught her younger sister how to write. She explained how she had taught her sister a letter a day and spoke of the fun they had had when her sister learned her first word: "Her first word was 'red,' because that was my favorite color. She wrote it all over the walls. My mom was so angry, but we were like, 'Ha ha ha.'" Alice's story of childhood fun was cast against the disapproval of an authority figure, her mother, who—not surprisingly—had wanted clean walls and a sense of order. Alice related a narrative in which writing for fun was pitted against an authority figure's displeasure.

As I listened to the stories of Alice and the other preservice teachers, I began to see how schooling could work against a belief that writing should be fun, should be playful. Even at the elementary level, schools sometimes discount the value of play (for a discussion and critique of this view, see Dyson, *The Brothers and Sisters Learn to Write*).

It is for this reason—showing students ways to find pleasure in writing—that programs like the National Writing Project offer something valuable.

Making Possibility

When writing teachers enter the classroom, their teaching is contoured by many images and stories about literacy: from their formal training, from their teaching practice, from their everyday lives as literate individuals in a literate culture, and from their experience as political citizens in a realm where certain values attach to being literate and others do not. My observations of the preservice teachers in one class highlight how multiple and sometimes competing stories can shape one's identity as a teacher. This ambiguity in teachers' stories, the sharing of different points of view in the classroom, is a necessary condition for teacher education. It can offer a space for dialogue on the types of pedagogies we need for students. Most significantly, through such discussion we might help teachers identify misalignment between their own visions of education and the practices they propose. In this way, teachers' stories of literacy and schooling might be read as opportunities to identify dispositions toward literacy and their connection to the class readings. Creating a space for these stories can open up a dialogue on the types of pedagogies we want and need. It can also help teachers recognize how their own beliefs about what literacy does and does not do can connect to the practices they advocate.

Put differently and more specifically, this chapter suggests that a focus on literacy's perceived payoff may be at odds with pedagogical approaches that value the teaching of writing as a process, this because process pedagogies tend to de-emphasize direct instruction in the habits and skills that are popularly linked to the payoff..

Consequently, we need to create forums where teachers are able to share competing definitions of reading and writing, as well as their own beliefs as to what reading and writing might offer students. This is an important first step: to open up dialogue and recognize the multiplicity of definitions and beliefs. An important second step would be to extend this discussion to identifying practices that work toward these goals. Such work can support preservice professional development, and the research backing it, in ways that revisit those theories and practices that we most value in the field of writing studies. By revisiting and even questioning theories and practices against particular situations and circumstances, we can both strengthen our theories and support the making of new teachers.

Notes

⁹ The name of the teacher and those of all students are pseudonyms.

¹⁰ As will be clear in subsequent chapters, I use the term “literacy narratives” broadly to describe a wide range of experiences related to literacy, including the making of a book (chapter 4) and classroom conversations (such as those expressed in this chapter and also in chapter 5).

¹¹ I also believe that this practice is one that need not be confined to novice teachers, as later chapters will show.

¹² See also Beth Daniell’s work on master narratives of literacy.

¹³ In the 20 March 2011 issue of *New York*, Andrew Rice describes how teachers “are under assault from union-busting Republicans on the right and wealthy liberals on

the left.” He writes, “The traditional, patronizing view of teachers, that they are to be treated like saints and paid as if they’d taken a vow of poverty, has lately gone through a schizophrenic inversion.”

¹⁴ Drawing on Weber and Mitchell’s work, Alsup notes how often teachers created pictures that depicted stereotypical markers “(pointers, chalkboards, authoritative poses, female, Caucasian, etc.)” (6).

¹⁵ In a review essay entitled “Myths of Paulo Freire,” Kathleen Weiler remarks on how Freire often used autobiography, particularly in his “spoken books,” to validate his revolutionary work: “Since Freire often... refers to his own life and experience as support for his ideas, he in a sense calls them to the reader’s attention as evidence of authenticity or truth. In the case of Freire’s own history, it is often difficult to establish the facts of his life, not to mention the meaning of these ‘facts’.... A large part of the myth of the revolutionary Freire rests on these narratives as he has presented them in interviews and autobiographical fragments” (356). The same issue that suffuses debates about the literacy myth also surfaces in the study of autobiography—namely, how we can accept what has been said as a fact?

¹⁶ See chapter 3 for a discussion of Wiley’s experience teaching *Lives on the Boundary*.

¹⁷ During each class meeting, I tended to sit as an observer in the same space: below a large window on the right-hand side of the room. My intent was not to disrupt the dynamics of the class; moreover, I did not want my own thinking about theories of literacy to influence how the preservice teachers responded. All class sessions were audio

recorded. This translated into two and a half hours of audio each week, collected for 15 weeks, as well as observational notes for all of the meetings.

¹⁸ This may be a limitation of the study since it was not designed to ask teachers to address directly whether or not they loved writing.

¹⁹ At the time of the writing of this dissertation, funding for the National Writing Project was in jeopardy. See Sharon J. Washington's press release.

²⁰ In chapter 3, Michael also questions the American Dream, yet nevertheless remains hopeful that his connections with students might prove beneficial.

²¹ In the introduction to the 2005 edition of *Other People's Children*, Lisa Delpit writes: "Of course, as I submitted in *Other People's Children*, it is still imperative that we actually teach children the academic skills they need to be successful participants in society, but I now realize, with ever-increasing clarity, that we must do that and much more" (xv).

²² For a discussion of the laminated processes of literacy, see the work of Prior; and Prior and Shipka.

Frame 2: Teachers as Subjects and Theorists: Voices from Published Texts

Chapter 3

Reading *Lives on the Boundary*

Some teachers and some students do achieve despite great odds, and there are qualities they possess that we should define and celebrate as heroic.... The problem is that these stories often get told in one-dimensional ways, fixed story lines that strip away broader social-political contexts, alternative perspectives, contradictory material. A related, and more serious, problem is that these are pretty much the only kinds of stories we hear.

—Mike Rose, “Tales Out of School”

Educators, reporters and more than a few Hollywood screenwriters have been telling, and retelling, the same story about American education for nearly half a century. Its elements—in books like *Up the Down Staircase*, *36 Children*, *Death at an Early Age*, *The Way It Spoiled to Be*, *Lives on the Boundary*, *Small Victories*, *Will My Name Be Shouted Out?* and, most recently, *On the Outside Looking In*—are so familiar they’ve become clichés.

—Sara Mosle, *New York Times*

More than twenty years have passed since the publication of Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary*, an iconic text in writing studies that continues to be quoted in scholarly forums and excerpted in college readers. If there were a canon for composition, as Mark Wiley argues, Rose's text "would be a unanimous choice." It has been used in first-year composition, in graduate seminars, and in the teaching of teachers. But what does *Lives* really teach us about literacy and schooling? Some would argue that it teaches us how our schools fail students from poor families and how with a bit of luck and support from caring teachers and outsiders, students on the boundary, like Rose himself, can succeed. Others might read Rose's story—one of a son of an Italian-American immigrant, the first in his family to go to college—as a version of the American Dream. Or is it a cliché, as Sara Mosle suggests in a *New York Times* book review that places Rose's memoir alongside a collection of other familiar narratives about teachers trying to make a difference in students' lives?

In this chapter, I illustrate how literacy narratives, especially those told by college writing teachers, are far more complicated and ambiguous than has been previously acknowledged in our scholarship. *Lives on the Boundary* serves as a particularly important example of the mixed messages that can be taken from such narrative accounts of literacy. If one of its purposes has been to teach and inspire, the lessons learned from *Lives* have been anything but consistent. Through a brief reception history in writing studies journals, I illustrate the multiple readings that students and scholars have made of *Lives*. To explore teachers' readings of this text more deeply, I then offer three case studies of writing teachers reflecting on the meaning of *Lives* in relation to their literacy histories and teaching experiences. I asked teachers to read *Lives* against their own lives

because reading literacy narratives involves, as Eldred and Mortensen show, contending with competing cultural beliefs about literacy (513). Whether college writing teachers read *Lives* as a narrative about social and economic advancement or as yet another miraculous story about a great teacher who saves the day, their readings are shaped by their own experiences—personally and disciplinarily—with literacy. Literacy narratives like Rose’s support exploring such beliefs and engaging in a more nuanced discussion about literacy’s relationship to social class and upward mobility.

Rose describes *Lives* as “a hopeful book about those who fail” (xi). But it is also a hopeful book about those who succeed, a narrative about social and economic mobility in which literacy plays a significant role. It is this dual sense of hope that has contributed to competing readings and controversy within writing studies over the text’s central messages. At issue are questions about assimilation and upward mobility, as well as the role that English educators play in this narrative. “If the ability to read and write was once regarded as a duty to God or democracy,” writes Deborah Brandt, “it is now, according to the government, a duty to productivity, and one with increasingly sharp consequences for those not in compliance” (“Literacy, Learning and Economic Change,” 374). Such an emphasis has been resisted by many of us who fear that such positioning will contribute to a reductive pedagogy that focuses solely on financial mobility. In a 2005 afterword to *Lives*, Rose warns against such a singular focus on economics as a driving force toward understanding literacy and schooling, while at the same time acknowledging how his own education translated into economic advancement:

The economic motive has always been a significant factor in the spread of mass education in the United States, and as someone from the working

class who has achieved financial mobility from schooling, the importance of the link between education and economic well being is not lost on me.²³

(245)

Transformation via literacy does not always happen. In fact, literacy scholars have grown increasingly skeptical of autonomous claims about literacy's potential to transform lives, as has been discussed in the first chapter; yet we regularly encounter (and are attracted to) such narratives in individuals' personal literacy histories, including those of teachers.

If Rose's narrative had been told by someone outside the field, we might be more critical of it. "His story remains the story of the immigrant, of bumpy roads into the middle class. His story is not typical of the college kid," writes Victor Villanueva in the prologue to *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*. Villanueva's own narrative of his journey from "GED to PhD—an American success story," as he puts it, exemplifies another exception to the rule (xiv). The most celebrated of a string of texts that include literacy narratives by writing professors, usually male, from working-class backgrounds (see, for example, Gilyard; Shor; Yagelski; and V.Young), *Lives* is also perhaps the most hopeful of them, and it is this sense of hope that contributes to the story's surpassing appeal.²⁴ In Rose's narrative and in others like it, the disempowered not only become empowered, but also become college English professors who are committed to helping students make their lives better personally, socially, and economically. Yet the privilege of being a professor can only do so much. "What good is it that I'm a ghetto-boy-turned-college professor if I couldn't help him or his kids?" asks Vershawn Ashanti Young in *Your Average Nigga: Performing Race, Literacy, and Masculinity* after recounting the death of his cousin's boyfriend, who had desperately

wanted Young's help in navigating Chicago's troubled public schools for his children. In questioning his power as a college professor to transform lives, Young calls attention to the uncertain role that literacy and education can play in the lives of students from disadvantaged communities.

Young's narrative and others like it remind us that stories of success reflect exceptional cases, not the widespread availability of pathways that lead to it. Moreover, they show us that making it to the academy does not always correlate with social mobility. They also remind us how the traditional taxonomies of social class are, as Rita Felski suggests, no longer sufficient. The middle class and lower middle class are hardly an anomaly, but rather a rarely discussed part of English studies:

[I]t is surely time for scholars to think more carefully about their portrayal of the petite bourgeoisie. It is the ultimate act of bad faith among left intellectuals to want the working class to remain poor but pure, untainted by consumer culture and social aspirations. The issues raised by the 'problem' of the lower middle class—issues relating to changing forms of employment, desires of social mobility, aspirations for one's children—are more pertinent to much of the population in the industrialized West than is the left's residual fantasy of an organic working class. (44)

Schools are often places, as Pierre Bourdieu and others suggest, where class distinctions are produced rather than transcended.²⁵ The presence of working-class academics and especially lower-middle-class academics has not received sustained attention. Literacy narratives such as *Lives* can help us locate shifting discourses about social class and mobility as well as confront their effects on our lives and our teaching. They can also

function as a heuristic that allows teachers to consider the beliefs that inform students' understandings of literacy and social mobility as well as their own.

“[W]e must all be careful,” as Beth Daniell warns, “of literacy narratives that make us feel good” and “that cast some of us in the role of ‘hero[es] of liberty.’” Yet I would add that we must also be careful not to dismiss a literacy narrative simply because it makes us feel good or it portrays acts of heroism. *Lives* is indeed a story that makes us feel good, and along with Rose’s efforts to highlight the lives and potential of disadvantaged students, he does project the image of a heroic teacher. While the book has received some criticism, particularly related to issues of gender and narrative tropes (Brannon; Collins and Blot; Launius; Trimbur; and Wiley), it remains a perennial favorite. One explanation of this might be that the text does indeed disrupt the notion of the academy as a middle-class enterprise. In a recent issue of *College English*, Nancy Welch questions whether middle-class values are indeed pathways to social mobility, as Lynn Bloom famously argued in “Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise,” published in *College English*. Looking at the movements in the academy that have worked to improve issues of access and diversity, she concludes:

Urban open-admissions universities, the language rights movement, the creation of programs in women’s, LGBT, and ethnic studies, and yes, the welcoming into composition pedagogies of Freirian critical thinking and problem-posing education: these are among the results of that period of rhetorical revival, the hallmarks not of composition’s middle-class orientation as Bloom has it, but of its multiracial working-class roots.

(227)

Indeed, *Lives* is aligned with this working-class tradition, yet I contend that its orientation is not simply toward working-class or middle-class values. To reduce Rose's text to one or the other is to miss the very real tension that exists between the two, which is what I begin to explore in the next section by looking at how other teachers responded to Rose's text.

Heroic Interventions

A look at some of the early reviews of *Lives* reveals both enthusiasm and hope about the potential of English educators to intervene to correct circumstances. In one of the earliest, Jacqueline Joyce Royster praises Rose for holding up "a torch over desperate territory" (350). In Royster's estimation, Rose is the progressive guide who will illuminate a pathway across the boundary territory that separates working-class people from the completion of a college education. Rose and his students, Royster writes, "are not the only ones who have been undernourished and who are continuing to be undernourished by our education system" (350). *Lives*, for Royster, signaled a call to arms, being a text with the potential to mobilize teachers and scholars to take action against the injustices that created underprepared students. Many teachers were likely aware of the struggles of the underprepared, yet Rose's narrative style, a combination of memoir and critical analysis, brought the issues home. Royster, moreover, recognized something of her own experience of marginalization in *Lives*: "Mike Rose has painted a compelling vision indeed, and as a person also marginalized by the particular circumstances of race, class, and gender, I hope that we will be compelled to rise to the occasion with positive, productive, systemic action" (350).

Other reviewers, such as Joseph Trimmer, focused on a series of chance encounters depicted in *Lives*. In *College English*, Trimmer welcomed *Lives* into the field's professional folklore by comparing it with scenes from landmark studies of writing research—works by scholars such as Mina Shaughnessy and Shirley Brice Heath who, like Rose, pondered experiences with marginalized students. Two scenes figure prominently in Trimmer's review, the first being that in which Rose is mistakenly placed in vocational education. "Deliverance is just as chancy as damnation," writes Trimmer. "[A] biology teacher, puzzled by Rose's successes on quizzes, checks the school records, discovers the error, and recommends College Prep" (759). The second instance of chance comes when Rose meets Jack MacFarland, a charismatic "beatnik" English teacher from Columbia University who found his way to Rose's high school, *Our Lady of Mercy* (32). As Trimmer explains, MacFarland "hooks Rose on the great conversation—reading, talking, and writing about books" and "challenges him to consider college, and then helps him acquire a loan and conditional admission to Loyola University" (760). Trimmer's review positions teachers as potential saviors who can lift individuals out of inequitable circumstances.

While Royster and Trimmer positioned Rose as the exceptional teacher, a savior needed in troubled times, John Trimbur wondered if *Lives* could really be read as a testament to the power of literacy and higher education. In a provocative article in *JAC*, Trimbur questioned whether *Lives* reinforced problematic beliefs about literacy, economic advancement, and social mobility:

To put it as directly as I can, the risk is that readers will take *Lives on the Boundary* to be another comforting American success story of an

individual who, through the power of education and the guidance of more experienced teachers-mentors, takes the predictable road to self-improvement and upward mobility, from the mean streets of Los Angeles to the halls of UCLA. (238)

Implicit in Trimbur's comment is the claim that *Lives* is *not* a "comforting American success story" and that to understand it this way would constitute a misreading. Yet I contend that *Lives* does indeed advance a success story. Experienced teachers and mentors did provide Rose with opportunities; reading did open him up to broader knowledge of the world; his life was enriched by his experiences in school—and now, as a professor of education at UCLA and a published author, we can assume that he is economically better off because of this experience.²⁶

Mark Wiley, who took exception to what he perceived as Trimbur's tentative critique, suggested that Trimbur lost the opportunity to investigate the way Rose represents teaching. When Wiley taught *Lives* with student teachers, they "felt left out"; in comparison to Rose's heroic acts, they felt, their accomplishments were trivial. This was because Rose's text, according to Wiley, portrayed good teaching as the exception and not the norm; both teachers and students were portrayed as victims. Wiley was concerned that his student teachers might view their own work as being in vain, and he was not alone.²⁷

Candace Spigelman assigned *Lives* with the intention of leading her students to see "many of the hidden assumptions relating to class, culture, and student potential that perpetuate...failure in American classrooms" (43). But her class was uncomfortable and silent: The students shut down. It was hard for them to understand her "willingness to

criticize the very institution” she represented (48). “Can you do that?” a student asked, wondering “aloud if [Spigelman] might not find [herself] ‘in trouble’ for being so ‘negative’ about education” (48). This experience caused Spigelman to reconsider her desire to have her students critique the value and relevance of their education; to do so, she thought, might be “both hypocritical and cruel” (50). She concluded that a better approach might be to work with students to negotiate “the institutions that they identify as resources for securing upward mobility” (50). Indeed, it is through such discussions that literacy narratives like *Lives* can be most helpful to students and teachers: instead of simply telling students how to read *Lives*, we can use the text to discuss perspectives on the possible. As Spigelman explains:

While *Lives on the Boundary* offers hope on the local scale, it raises serious questions about the ways American education is handled, about the complex, imbricated collaborations of racism, classism, and ethnocentrism that allow for the creation of what Rose terms an ‘educational underclass.’ (47)

It is precisely because *Lives* is both hopeful and critical that it has inspired divergent readings. Spigelman found that her students sometimes interpreted the book superficially, as the American success story that Trimbur describes (47). Such interpretations of *Lives*, however, go beyond student misreading, although like their teachers’, students’ readings of literacy narratives such as *Lives* are shaped by their life histories with literacy. In considering her students’ resistance to critique, Spigelman describes how she wrote to Rose, who responded by suggesting that she have her students “try to find the local, immediate, familiar moment of injustice” and that she then “gently urge a looking

outward from it” (Spigelman 52). Rose was, in a sense, suggesting that students compose literacy narratives, “stories of self-translation,” as they read other literacy narratives, a practice described by Mary Soliday in 1994 in relation to her work with urban students at the City University of New York (“Translating” 513).

The question at the center of Spigelman’s and Soliday’s explorations is not simply who has or has not read a particular literacy narrative correctly, but rather what literacy can and cannot do. This issue surfaces through an account of another supposed misreading, when Bruce Herzberg reported on his use of *Lives* in a community service course. He describes “how difficult [his] students find it to transcend their own deeply-ingrained belief in individualism and meritocracy in their analysis of the reasons for the illiteracy they see” (312). He attempts to lead students away from slumbering individualism, hoping they will wake up *not* to Rose’s “oasis of possibility,” but to the “hard truth” that schools are not institutions for social change (314). Unlike Spigelman’s critique, Herzberg’s is anything but hopeful. When his students read Rose’s line “American meritocracy is validated and sustained by a deep-rooted belief in equal opportunity,” they pause at first and then “mistakenly” fall back on the notion that this is a positive statement (313). Herzberg suggests that students find it difficult to face Rose’s critical stance:

It costs them a great effort to see that Rose is saying that one false idea is sustained by another, that the very words “validated and sustained” carry a negative connotation, that “deep-rooted belief” means self-deception. It costs them more than intellectual effort: It means a re-evaluation of the

very deep-rooted beliefs that Rose is discussing here. It means that Rose is talking about their beliefs and criticizing them. (313)

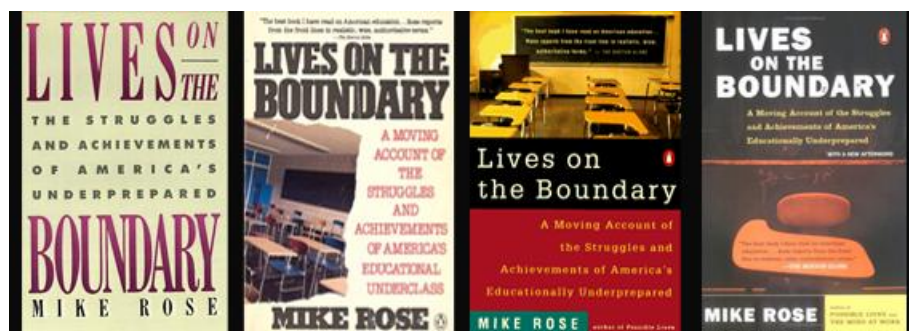
When one of Herzberg's students, Lynne, tells of her grandfather's immigration from Italy, how he became a success in America "without a cent" and "without help from anyone," Herzberg laments that Lynne is still holding on to an individualistic notion of success (314). The problem with Lynne, Herzberg tells us, is not that she's a "conservative ideologue," but merely that she is "unselfconscious" (315). Although Herzberg argues that schools do not bring about social change, he ends his piece by describing an experience of critical literacy: "Developing a social imagination makes it possible not only to question and analyze the world, but also to imagine transforming it" (317). He, like Rose, is unhappy with the state of literacy and higher education, yet has difficulty negotiating the space between hope and critique. What appears absent in this class discussion is an awareness of how both Lynne's and Rose's accounts represent exceptions rather than the norm.

Projecting Lives on Lives

In 1992, Janice Neuleib published "The Friendly Stranger: Twenty-Five Years as 'Other,'" in which she used *Lives* as a backdrop in relating her own literacy narrative, which includes descriptions of her high school and college teaching. Although Neuleib's life story is significantly different from Rose's, a point that she acknowledges, she nevertheless explains that she has "struggled with the problems [Rose] addresses" (231). She describes, for example, an experience from 1958 when she tutored a friend in Latin, a language that she loved, but her friend was simply not interested in "the grandeur that

was Rome” (231). As a future scholar, Neuleib recognized that she was “other”—that is, as compared to the students around her who did not share her cultural interests.

Later, as a high school teacher, she remembered working with underprepared students whom “no one else wanted,” and she worried that the kids “would steal the textbooks” (232). At her university, she came in contact with students from Chicago’s inner city who were not impressed with her PhD in British Literature. From these contacts with those who were “other,” and from Rose’s story and her teaching experiences, Neuleib learned that she needed to change her values: “Students may be ignorant of the academic community’s language and values,” she writes; nevertheless, teacher knowledge is not “the only value to be exchanged in teacher/student exchange” (241). Neuleib’s narrative is a dramatic example of how *Lives* can be appropriated to tell a wide range of stories about teaching and learning. My point is not to argue that Neuleib misread *Lives*, but to show the range of ways in which this text has been used by both teachers and students as a catalyst for reflection on their own experiences with literacy.



1989

1990

circa 1998/99

2005

Figure 1: Different covers of *Lives on the Boundary*.

Even the book's various covers and subtitles invite interpretation. In the images (see fig. 1), we see four covers of *Lives*, covers without teachers or students. No real boundaries are presented visually, only empty classrooms onto which teachers and students can project their own stories. In 1989, the book was subtitled *The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared*. In 1990, *America's Underprepared* became *America's Educational Underclass* in a Penguin edition, suggesting the lowest social stratum when it came to education. After 1998, the subject of Rose's study became *America's Educationally Underprepared*, issues of social class having been transformed into the separation of those who are prepared from those who are not. In the book's most recent version, from 2005, the cover features an empty desk. Rose's "boundaries," of course, as described throughout *Lives*, do not exist solely in the classroom, nor do the moments of possibility that help individuals negotiate such spaces. As a marketing vehicle, all of these covers offer a blank visual space upon which the student and the teacher can be projected.

In this reception discussion, we see writing teachers celebrating, questioning, and translating Rose's story in scholarly forums through the lens of their own experiences. In what follows, I introduce three case studies of writing teachers—Michael, Sara, and Susan²⁸—all white, all middle class, all teaching writing in different disciplinary contents (Michael in literature, Sara in writing studies, and Susan in ESL),²⁹ and all interested in the transformative potential of writing. I contend, along with Eldred and Mortensen, that reading literacy narratives—and more specifically, reading the literacy narratives of teachers—can illuminate the multiple ways in which literacy is understood, differences in understanding that are not always evident in scholarly forums.

Literacy Narratives as Method

The previous section has highlighted the multiple ways in which teachers have read *Lives* in scholarly forums. The three case studies that follow extend this discussion by asking teachers to read Rose's story against their own beliefs in literacy—against their own literacy narratives and teaching. I provided each teacher with the 2005 edition of *Lives* and asked him or her to reflect on it in connection with his or her own life. The teachers wrote essays and participated in audio-recorded interviews about *Lives* and their own experiences with literacy. Through this analysis, I demonstrate how Michael's, Sara's, and Susan's readings of *Lives* are shaped by their life experiences as well as by the text's navigation between hopeful and critical dispositions. *Lives* serves as a catalyst in leading them to recall their own experiences with school and reflect upon their hopes for improving literacy education for their students and themselves. In presenting these personal stories, my aim is to show not only how teachers read *Lives*, but also how literacy narratives provide a way to “read” teachers—specifically, as to their beliefs in social mobility and possibility.

Rolling Up His Sleeves: Michael

Michael is a non-tenure-track instructor of literature and composition at a private university located in a wealthy metropolitan suburb on the East Coast. The university is known for attracting students of privilege from the neighboring towns. As is the case at many universities, it is not unusual for students at Michael's institution to be taught by nontenured English teachers who are routinely paid less than their tenured and tenure-track colleagues. In the fall of 2006, I met with forty-year-old Michael, who holds a PhD

in English, lives thirty miles away from the campus where he teaches, and holds a second job as a cook to get medical insurance for himself and his family. At his university, he said, he observed the language of commerce increasingly being used to describe learning, a trend he resists in his teaching. His response to *Lives* illustrates an affinity with Rose in terms of issues of social class and the limitations of higher education:

Rose's narrative of teaching is clearly grounded in his own class background and personal experiences as a student. It was this aspect of Rose's narrative that I found most relevant to my own experience.

Although I would describe my own background as lower middle to middle-class, I grew up in a neighborhood that was a mix of middle-class and working-class people. Therefore, Rose's description of the despair and disillusionment he experienced and the closing off of possibility characteristic of those from his class background parallels my own path to literacy in many respects.

Michael remained skeptical that large-scale social change would take place, contending that the hope that Rose described would never create real change given the country's current economic structure. In Rose, he found someone with whom to identify—someone who shared his concern for recovering a sense of possibility with literacy sometimes denied to working-class people.

After struggling for years to make ends meet while completing his PhD, Michael found himself confronting the class-based biases of the academy as an adjunct instructor. In his response to *Lives*, Michael wrote of how Rose's discomfort with the academy's exclusivity related to his own similar discomfort, and of how he saw his primary role as

the “transformation” of his students’ lives and the “opening up of that world of possibility described throughout *Lives on the Boundary*.” He believed in what literacy education *could* be while realizing that his own “world of possibility” was at odds with the “exclusivity” of the academy. Despite some discouragement, he still found a modest hope in his profession. Michael wrote, “Rose’s discomfort with certain aspects of the academy, particularly its exclusivity, [is] also central to my own vision of true education, a term that I see in contrast to the bureaucratic and often misguided structure of higher education in the United States.”

Although many of Michael’s students were privileged, he would occasionally encounter a student with whom he identified:

I had a guy I worked with on his thesis who came to see me every week and had a very similar background. I think sometimes they know...you can understand them. He was 22 and really angry, the way I was [at his age], drinking a lot the way I was, smoking a lot like I was.

During an independent study meeting, the student wrote Michael and told him about his problems, and Michael brought up his own early struggles with alcoholism as an undergraduate, something that he said he usually tended not to do. As he reflected on his own undergraduate days, when he was angry and often drank and smoked too much, Michael remembered the alienation that could come to divide students and teachers—and the bonds that he had formed with teachers who valued his thinking. In discussing this experience, Michael was reminded of Rose’s image of the generous and humane quality of the educator that Rose saw in Paulo Freire and his high school mentor Jack MacFarland. As Rose explains:

Freire acknowledged [a student's] question and, as he began answering, he turned and quickly touched the man's forearm. Not patronizing, not mushy, a look and a tap as if to say: 'You and me right now, let's go through this together.' Embrace. With Jack MacFarland it was an embrace: no-nonsense and cerebral, but a relationship in which the terms of endearment were the image in a poem, a play's dialogue, the winding narrative journey in a novel. (225)

In MacFarland and Freire, we see the figure of the male mentor who teaches compassionately and with an eye on the developing learner. Rose, who had lost his father just when MacFarland entered his life, connected with this deep emotional support. Such bonds reminded Michael of those that he had formed as an undergraduate and that had sustained him throughout his college career.

Like Rose, Michael had his own mentors, many but not all of whom were men. In describing *Lives*, he recalled the teachers who had made a difference in Rose's life:

[Rose's] early portraits of the professors...stood out in my mind. They stood out for me for a number of reasons. I could substitute for those individuals a whole cast of individuals.... I could substitute people who were important to me for the same reasons, but also that I could aspire to be like those individuals.... They were moving tributes. You teach, you can get burned out, you can lose your enthusiasm.... [S]ometimes, reading things like that gives you back your fire, gives you back your emphasis.... Like Rose, I see my role as an educator in terms of a political commitment to resist the commodification of learning, a process that I believe that Rose

is right to connect to all attempts to assess the educational process in quantitative terms.

In a similar fashion to Rose, Michael looks to his own mentors for inspiration on how to teach, and especially on how to work with working-class students. Although he thought of himself as middle class, Michael identified with the working-class struggles described by Rose and in his own teaching tried to convey his affinity with the working class.

Jokingly, he explained how he often rolled up his sleeves in the classroom, a sign of his willingness to get his hands dirty. Yet as Rita Felski contends, as noted earlier, class boundaries are becoming more and more difficult to define. The lower middle class, for example, while not possessing the chic of working-class identity, nevertheless remains a durable and complex presence in the academy.

“I have always treated the subject that I teach, although important in its own right and integral to the learning process, as secondary to the goal of facilitating the autonomy of my students,” Michael explained, expressing a particular affinity with working-class students. When asked what made him connect with them, he said that it was a “sensibility,” a “work ethic,” a “familiarity with manual labor.” Even though he had received a PhD, he had no interest in giving up that aspect of his identity. As he explained:

I share [Rose’s] belief in democracy, which obviously doesn’t exist.

He’s...committed to democracy, but I think it is clear from the way higher education and secondary education is structured...it’s designed to leave [some students] behind.

When I asked Michael about his motivation for getting a PhD in English, he said, “I did it because I felt strongly about books—and felt passionately about ideas and wanted to communicate them to others.” Michael’s response reminded me of Rose’s discussion of “the almost magical vision” that students assign to learning, and of Rose’s comment that “regardless of what I had come to know about the realities of higher education, I could sure understand the desire to be transfigured by books” (137-38). Yet in Michael’s case, his attraction to books and their power was not the leaning of someone unaware of the realities of higher education; instead, it reflected a position in which passionate teaching stood in opposition to the corporate university.

At the end of his reflective essay, Michael remarked that if he had to present a criticism of *Lives*, it was that it failed to offer “any practical solutions to the institutional practices and structures that reinforce the problems that it addresses.” Michael was mindful of the book’s good, practical advice and heard the call to arms that Royster described, yet wondered what to do next. His reading of *Lives* conveys how teachers can view themselves as outsiders against a university and social system that too often discount the potential of marginalized students. Michael saw his own acts of subversion happening in the classroom in the midst of the corporatization of his university. His reading also reflects a modest hope that arises in the classroom and is strengthened by the relationships between teachers and students.

Picking Leaves vs. Saving Lives: Sara

When I met Sara, she was a doctoral student in writing studies at a public university in the Midwest. She was also assistant director of the university’s basic writing

program, a job she loved in part because students were required to have one-on-one conferences with their instructors. She grew up in a middle-class home in the Northeast in what she called a “blue-collar town.” Her family included published authors, and starting in the second grade, she delighted in writing and maintaining journals. Over the years, we talked increasingly about the teaching of writing and its connection to notions of possibility. I invited Sara to read *Lives*, which she had not previously read, in part because of our earlier conversations and in part because of the prominent and meaningful role that writing seemed to play in her life.

It was not unusual to see Sara with one of her large journals open—writing by hand, looking up, and writing more. She tended to be quiet, sometimes prompting an invitation from a professor who wanted to hear her thoughts. During such moments, which occurred with increasing frequency, she would speak, often with pauses to collect her words. Without fail, her delivery was thoughtful, reflecting the crafting of words that one might expect from someone with a background in creative writing, which she had. Over the course of her graduate career, she worked increasingly with struggling writers, including those in the university’s basic writing program, and later she participated in a social justice effort to offer higher education to incarcerated men.

Sara’s response to *Lives* reflected her interest in helping others, but it also reflected her feeling that she was not as good a teacher as Rose. When considering Rose’s experience in comparison to her own, she found herself very different from him: “He’s publishing all over the place and changing lives, and I am spending my afternoons in the rhetoric office picking dead leaves out of the window well and crushing them on the desk with my finger.” In connecting Rose’s publications with his ability to change lives, Sara

points to his publication record, although whether or not such publications “change lives” remains unclear. Perhaps with excessive modesty, Sara suggested that while Rose was changing lives, she was doing less consequential work. Her response exemplifies, to some extent, what Wiley described when he taught *Lives* in a graduate seminar; his students, public school teachers, felt that their own work was “trivialized” by Rose’s heroic efforts. Rather than inspiring teachers, Rose’s story left these teachers feeling discouraged, as if they could never quite measure up to him.

For Sara, in a similar sense, the space between her own teaching and Rose’s could not have seemed greater. Unlike Michael, Sara did not see aspects of herself in Rose. She tended to concentrate on Rose’s results, how she saw him as having moved from one boundary location to another, from “the tough Los Angeles elementary schools” to the veterans program. “He makes all this change there and has these successes,” Sara noted—and then he moved on. Unlike herself, Sara contended, Rose was “gutsy.” Even though she was working as assistant director for a basic writing program, and later as a teacher in a men’s prison, she tended not to see her teaching as “gutsy” or heroic.

As Sara continued to discuss her work, she highlighted again and again the difference between herself and Rose as represented in *Lives*. For instance, she described her reluctance, at times, to change a syllabus. When reflecting on her teaching of high school students in a gifted program, she said, “[I]t is not like I am doing much of anything for these kids that they couldn’t get from someone else in line or won’t in a couple of months get at their private schools, or from one of their fleet of tutors or what have you, and [despite the fact] that there are places of [greater] need, I am there again every summer.” At first, it appeared that Rose’s story led Sara to view her own teaching

as inadequate; she was with the gifted high school students while Rose was moving from one boundary space to another. Yet as the conversation continued, I realized that although Sara resisted a narrative in which she was identified as heroic or that positioned other teachers as such, she remained committed to supporting diverse learners.

When I asked Sara if she had had teachers in her life who reminded her of MacFarland, perhaps someone who had mentored her in a similar way, she said that she had not. In the course of all her English classes, she could not recall having had teachers who had opened doors in such a way. “I still don’t feel like I’ve had a teacher who taught me well how to read,” Sara writes. “I really don’t feel like I have that kind of relationship to reading.” She did recall having a teacher who analyzed and performed poetry in the classroom, helping her understand it better. “The best I could do in my analyses was imitate.... I did not have original ideas,” she said. Reflecting on Rose’s mentors, she said, “I didn’t have that. I wish I [had] had that.”

Sara was not alone in feeling distance from this narrative, perhaps in part because of its gendered dimension. Lil Brannon writes of how *Lives* “works the masculine heroic quest narrative” (461). In writing studies, narratives like Rose’s that involve teachers from working-class backgrounds rising through the ranks and then helping others have most often been told by men. Brannon describes the work of Penny Dugan, who did a close reading of Trimmer’s review of *Lives* and found that “Trimmer names every male high school and college teacher who helped Rose but does not name Rosalie Naumann, the only woman teacher who appears positively in Rose’s book” (461).³⁰

Sara reflected on the “professors’ kids” she knew and “how much better off they [were] in this scene, how much more seemingly natural [were] their arguments and

progress through process and ranks for all their [cultural] exposure—their dinner conversations.” In contrast, she remembered her “robust memorization.” Between fourth and eighth grade, she says, “I probably memorized [at] one time or another twenty to forty psalms, among numerous other passages.” She remembers taking to “memorizing decks of cards” before going to sleep. Rose’s story spoke to Sara about alternative ways in which students are socialized into learning and how she had felt that she had missed out, in a sense, by developing practices that relied exclusively on memorization.

At a university in the Northeast, Sara recalled teaching classes in technical writing and creative writing to students who were, as she described them, “homogenously composed”—which meant, she explained, that they were primarily white. When she moved to the Midwest, she found herself drawn to the basic writing program—a program that required one-on-one meetings between teachers and students and that tended to be heavily populated by students of color. As Sara explained it, “I loved, loved, the idea of being able to teach and tutor the same students.” One of the few areas in which Rose’s work really resonated with her was Rose’s discussion of the teaching of writing and the value of workshops. “It’s really true,” she said, “that [for] anyone who tries to write...everyone, everybody, [who] does it does it well...it’s simply a matter of confidence or experiment and practice. I really bought into what he was doing.” In this way, she imagined that she could help students overcome struggles with writing.

But her interventions, as she conveyed them, were always modest and contingent. While some might view her actions as heroic, she resisted this narrative, preferring to see her work in much more pragmatic terms. She also tended to express a less political focus in her work. While she might not be “saving lives” like Rose, she believed that “everyone

could write” and found pleasure in helping students recognize that they had such ability even when they doubted it.

Extending Boundary Pedagogies: Susan

Susan is an ESL teacher originally from New York City who was working on her Master of Arts in the Teaching of English as a Second Language when we met.

Originally a political activist involved in interdisciplinary efforts, Susan found herself in the Midwest teaching, more often than not, ESL to privileged international students.

Susan found in *Lives* a portrait of an excellent teacher whose experiences were inspiring, yet distinct from her own. Rose was, as she explained, the type of teacher she aspired to be, and for this reason she responded to *Lives* through her own experiences as a second-language learner and teacher.

As a child, Susan was always a talker, an active participant in classes from grade school through to the academy. It was not until she had to learn a second language, however, that she began to appreciate the difficulties that those outside the boundary faced. While living in the Netherlands during the mid-1980s and throughout the 1990s, she learned Dutch and began to understand the challenges of learning another language. Remembering that Rose mentioned non-native English speakers and the similarities of their situation to that of marginal and underprepared native-English-speaking students, Susan stressed the importance of listening and her appreciation of those teachers who were interested in understanding her ideas:

In my own second-language literacy development, what I most appreciated while learning Dutch was someone who understood what I

was *trying* to say even if I didn't say it correctly, someone who helped me feel fluent even though I wasn't, someone who filled in the blanks so that the conversation could keep going.

This was a strength that Susan found in Rose's work: his "respect for each student and what they are trying to say even if they [don't] always say it well or correctly." Her championing of Rose and his teaching methods was evident as she recalled her own experiences as a second-language learner of receiving a returned paper covered with red ink. Rose's good teaching paradoxically reminded her of those teachers who were less caring, less attuned to the ways in which writers learn language.

As Susan contemplated her own teaching, she was as mindful of what she should *not* do as she was of what she should do. While reading Rose, she was able to articulate practices that she herself believed in: to "work with particular problems that students themselves come up with on particular papers," "to build from simple to complex," and "to get students to think about thinking." She explained how she tried to listen carefully in order to understand the meanings that students were constructing, and "then give language back, in the same register and at the same level, that can expand on the student's idea." In her writing, she listed those pages where Rose addressed these issues. *Lives* in this sense provided instructional support, or at least validated Susan's own practices.

Like Michael, Susan mentioned the scene wherein Rose sees Freire touch a man's forearm while answering him, which, along with Rose's close relationship with Jack MacFarland, she found inspiring. When asked if she had ever had a close relationship with a teacher like that Rose had with MacFarland, she responded, "Not that close. When

you read that...you wish...you're really jealous [of] the way he talks about him.

Wouldn't that be wonderful if everyone [had] such a figure?" Although Susan could recall teachers who had behaved caringly toward her, these relationships paled in comparison to that between MacFarland and Rose.

Susan's own teaching was less intimate, although she did describe experiences helping students: "[L]ike Rose, I seek to get to know the students, and I like very much when I am able to say something direct and personal about their own development." For example, she recalled:

[There was a] somewhat slick, quick-talking Korean student who didn't have much vocabulary and was not very studious, but he seemed to understand a lot of what we listened to from English-language media and had very developed (Western-oriented) communication skills, such as looking you in the eye and moving in close when speaking. I told him on a few occasions that I thought he was an excellent communicator even though he still had a lot of language to learn. He obviously enjoyed being appreciated, and I believe my encouragement brought out a more serious side to him that wasn't evident early on.

Susan's story suggests how she took in Rose's words and applied his story to her own life experiences. What is striking about her description, as well as those of some of the other interview subjects, is how Rose was viewed as an exemplar of good teaching, as someone who always saw the potential in his students.

Although Susan was no longer working with students from disadvantaged situations, she still identified with the text and believed that its significance extended

beyond what it said about those from working-class backgrounds: “I am...left wondering about the solidly middle-class young students I know who are not on the boundary at all, yet write and express themselves just as haltingly as the underprepared.” She described the international students who came to her class as somewhat disengaged. They posed new challenges because, she believed, they seemed uninterested in political issues and more concerned with consumer culture.

When asked about the American Dream, Susan said, “You don’t have to be uncritical about it, but recognize that it does happen for some people.” As Rose himself notes in *Lives*, he got lucky (xi); a series of extraordinary moments led to his success at school and later as an academic. As our interview ended, Susan began to consider those students who were not so lucky. “What happens if you don’t make it? What happens if you don’t get saved?” she asked. At first, Susan’s comments suggested that Rose’s story was about exceptional students—that the others, those seen by educators as “boring” or unexceptional, might not get saved. Then, thoughtfully, she continued, “But maybe [everyone] has an exceptional life?”

Transfiguring Hope

We live, in America, with so many platitudes about motivation and self-reliance and individualism—and the myths spun from them, like those of Horatio Alger—that we find it hard to accept the fact that they are serious nonsense. To live your early life on the streets of South L.A.—or Homewood or Spanish Harlem or Chicago’s South Side or any one of hundreds of other depressed communities—and to journey up through the

top levels of the American educational system will call for support and guidance at many, many points along the way. (47)

In this passage, Rose reminds readers that self-reliance is a myth and that success requires the support of many. All the teachers surveyed in this study expressed admiration for Rose and his work. The support that most saw as the most helpful to students was that of the teachers themselves. In this way, Rose's story highlights the difference an excellent teacher can make in the lives of students. Michael, Sara, and Susan all emphasized Rose's focus on relationships—with books, with family, and with teachers. Because teachers and mentors believed in Rose, he learned to believe in himself, and he has continued this pattern throughout his career. Yet, interestingly, only Michael, the male in the group, said that he identified with Rose, and neither Sara nor Susan had ever had relationships with teachers as close as those Rose had with his mentors.

If *Lives on the Boundary* teaches us anything, it is how hard it is to define literacy and how the teacher as savior, despite Rose's thoughtful commentaries to the contrary, remains one of *Lives*'s most durable images. In this way, we might call *Lives*, as Kirk Branch puts it, a “traditional teaching narrative [that] allows for a rather glowing vision of the teacher as a leader and trumpets the possibilities of an almost limitless growth within the classroom” (“From the Margins” 212). Both Sara and Susan were in awe of Rose and his ability to make literacy matter in such diverse locations. But this was not easy, as the teachers explained, when they projected *Lives* against their own stories of teaching and observed much more modest gains.

In “Rags to Riches, Republican Style,” Rose criticizes the Republican Party’s use of rags-to-riches stories to celebrate opportunity and upward mobility in America: “[O]ne of the most striking things about rags-to-riches, Republican-style tales is that they are accounts of hardship with almost no real hardship to them” (434). Through “self-reliance, optimism, faith, [and] responsibility,” Rose says, such stories suggest that anyone can achieve upward mobility (434). Occasionally teachers are mentioned, he points out, but the real power in such stories is located in the individual: “Luck’s got nothing to do with it...[n]or does raw ambition and deal making” (434).

The issue, of course, is not whether or not upward mobility ever happens—it does. However, along with hard work, the opportunity for upward mobility depends on chance and the heroic acts of teachers and others. *Lives* is a story that honors the everyday work of teachers like Michael, Sara, and Susan, who confront inequity in distinctly different ways. Michael, while mindful of systemic problems, responds by turning his classroom into a sanctuary apart from the corporate university. Resisting heroic rhetoric, Sara gravitates to those students who are most in need, most recently by teaching writing to students in a medium-high security prison. As for Susan, she remains a teacher of ESL, and while she describes some of her students as “privileged” and “apolitical,” she nevertheless aims to be helpful to them.

At the center of all the readings discussed here are concerns about class distinctions and the potential of literacy to enable mobility. The seemingly simple distinction between working class and middle class, as Rita Felski explains, needs to be understood in more complex ways. While we should resist the corporatization of the university, as Michael attempts to do, we cannot ignore the very real ways in which

boundaries are created and sustained. Literacy narratives can motivate us to revisit and question deeply ingrained assumptions about writing and its potential both in our lives and in our students' lives; they can help us compare and contrast our beliefs about what is possible with the realities of particular situations; and they can provide a way of exploring not just the passage from one side of a boundary to another, but also how boundaries are continually being redefined throughout the academy and in the everyday lives of teachers and students.

Notes

²³ This link typically creates anxiety among educators. When Herbert Kohl reviewed *Lives*, he made a point of describing what the text was not: "Rose's story is not a Horatio Alger tale; his parents never escaped poverty, nor did his journey from south Los Angeles to his present position at U.C.L.A. writing programs bring him wealth" (531).

²⁴ See Christie Launius's essay for a discussion of how Gilyard, Villaneuva, and Rose deal with issues of literacy and masculinity. "For all three," she writes, "we see a search for male figures who can serve as bridges between worlds" (W291). Launius also includes a discussion of Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory*.

²⁵ For a discussion of social class in the academy, see Shepard, McMillan, and Tate's edited collection *Coming to Class: Pedagogy and the Social Class of Teachers* and

Dews, Barney, and Law's edited collection *This Fine Place So Far from Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class*.

²⁶ Trimbur ultimately justifies Rose's narrative, first by drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of articulation and the notion of conjecture and then by simply finding value in Rose's "refusal to separate himself from the lives on the boundary" (248). In other words, Trimbur pulls back on his critique of Rose's work because he finds in it qualities of altruism and community service. He also notes how, unlike other writers of literacy narratives such as Richard Rodriguez and Richard Wright, Rose never leaves "home."

²⁷ Wiley also objects to Trimbur's comparison of Rose's narrative with those by Rodriguez and Wright, asking whether Rose's education is "comparable to [that of] a Mexican-American who is also gay or to [that of] a black man living in the racist South in a different historical period."

²⁸ I have used pseudonyms.

²⁹ The three teachers here represent a sampling from six interviews collected between January 2005 and June 2009. The teachers were selected through a snowball methodology. Of the six teachers, three self-identified or expressed an affinity with the working class; two taught in areas outside composition and rhetoric; three were men, and three were women. I chose to include Michael, Sara, and Susan in my dissertation study because they each voiced a distinct perspective on Rose's *Lives* and each was able to illuminate issues related to gender, class, and disciplinary identity.

³⁰ See also Collins and Blot for a discussion of the gendered nature of *Lives* and Gilyard's *Voices of the Self* (116-119).

Chapter 4

Horton and Freire's *Road* as Literacy Narrative

“Well I’ve always kind of shied away from autobiography because I thought of myself as working much more closely with other people than doing an individualistic sort of thing,” explained celebrated educator and activist Myles Horton more than twenty years ago, when Paulo Freire asked him to talk about his life (Horton and Freire 9). “I recognize that your experience is a social experience,” Freire replied. “In fact, we cannot be explained by what we individually do, but undoubtedly there is a certain individual dimension of the social realization. You see?” (Horton and Freire 9-10).

In the opening pages of Horton and Freire’s *We Make the Road by Walking*, we discover how Horton is reluctant to share autobiographical material, seeing it as opposed to the community literacy work that made him famous, and how Freire is suggesting that there is indeed an individual dimension to their critical efforts. Ultimately, Horton did talk with Freire about his life, but with some hesitation, underscoring how many perspectives had informed his becoming who he was and how his beliefs had “changed and [were] constantly changing and *should* change” (10). In an Emersonian fashion, he explained, “I’m proud of my inconsistencies” (10). This dialogue between Horton and Freire is just one of the many conversations in their spoken book that consider the role of personal history in the making of these literacy educators and their theories of literacy.

I argue that Horton and Freire’s spoken book features literacy narratives that underscore the need for making personal connections a more central factor in understanding teachers, theorists, and the making of literacy theories. I use literacy

narrative as a heuristic for exploring narrative representations of literacy as cultural artifacts that embed historical, theoretical, and affective dimensions. Horton's and Freire's literacy narratives include stories about their early experiences with school, the making of the spoken book, and the embodied ways in which literacy was experienced, theorized, and narrated by them. Through such accounts, *We Make the Road by Walking* creates a space where theories and life narratives converge and where the stability of both is questioned. Horton and Freire's attempt to make their ways of knowing explicit through the "spoken book"—which is a dialogue recorded, transcribed, and edited—challenges the tendency for theories of literacy to be bracketed from the lives from which they have come. This challenge was one that confounded some reviewers and editors who were interested in finding the best way to narrate the literate lives of these central figures of literacy studies. Drawing on archival video, audio, and textual data related to the book's production, I explore how reviewers and editors confronted the educators' efforts to juxtapose their personal lives and theories. Ultimately, I suggest that the spoken book illustrates the value of creating dialogic space where theories and life converge, a space that can help teachers and theorists appreciate the contingent and fluid nature of theory making.

At the time of their meeting in New Market, Tennessee, in 1987, both Horton and Freire were well-established literacy educators with an abundance of experiences and stories. Freire was 66 and Horton was 82 when they decided to "speak a book" and converse on education, literacy, and social change. Prior to their meeting, both men had suffered personal hardship: Freire's wife, Elza, had died earlier that year, and Horton had just recovered from an operation for colon cancer. Such biographical details, mentioned

in the introduction and the text, situate the men and provide insight into the particularities of their meeting. The spoken book offered them a long-overdue chance to meet and discuss each other's work, while still never losing sight of themselves as older men in trying times. When they met, they shared stories of their childhoods and of their experiences with educational inequity and poverty and spoke about how such experiences informed their theories. Although they came from different parts of the world and began work nearly twenty-five years apart, Horton and Freire shared a long-standing commitment to creating access to literacy learning for those who were poor and powerless—a theme that we see in both men's autobiographies.

Horton, who co-founded the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee and served as its director from 1932 through 1973, has been described as “one of the most unsung educational figures in American history,” an educator who worked outside of traditional systems of schooling (Branch, *Eyes on the Ought to Be* 8). Under his direction, which consistently emphasized the necessity of beginning with the issues and problems of everyday people, the Highlander Folk School acted as a powerful catalyst for community activism and assumed a central role in the Civil Rights Movement, most notably by offering literacy workshops to African Americans who were being denied the right to vote because of their inability to read and write (Adams; Clark; Glen). Through such efforts, we see how configurations of literacy as a barrier to exclude African Americans were challenged by the efforts of Horton and Highlander. “The immediate goal was getting the right to vote,” Horton writes in his autobiography, *The Long Haul*; “[b]ecoming literate was only part of a larger process” (100). It was indeed larger processes that shaped individual meaning in Horton's personal life; in reflecting on his

grandfather's illiteracy during a time when there were no schools nearby, for example, Horton writes, "He wasn't embarrassed about the fact that he couldn't read or write. He had a keen mind and from him I learned to respect people who weren't literate, in the technical sense" (2).

Freire, of course, is an icon for progressive educators across the world, and his theoretical approach has figured into the work of many rhetoricians and compositionists who inquire into notions of critical and reflective practice (see, for example, Enoch; Roskelly and Ronald; Shor). His work is required reading for many teachers and appears in numerous composition, rhetoric, and literacy anthologies (see, for example, Austin; Bartholomae and Petrosky; and Cushman, Kintgen, Kroll, and Rose). He is often quoted as saying that we read the word and the world, configuring literacy as a central component in liberatory pedagogy (Freire and Macedo). At the same time, he was mindful of how his readings of the world changed over time: "The eyes with which I review the past are not the same eyes with which I saw the past. No one can speak about what has happened unless it is through the perspective of what is now happening" (*Letters to Cristina* 3). Memories of the past along with the stories that are shared about it are informed by what is seen through the lens of the present moment and time period.

Although they came from different parts of the world, during their meeting in 1987, Horton and Freire found a way to locate points of shared struggle and understanding about literacy. The editors of *We Make the Road by Walking* summed it up this way: "Their remarkable common experiences represent more than one hundred years of educational praxis," going on to explain that these experiences demonstrated how literacy could matter in significant ways in activist frameworks that aimed to make

theoretical knowledge legible (xv). In reflecting on their theories through their personal histories, Horton and Freire take what Hephzibah Roskelly and Kate Ronald call a “romantic/pragmatic stance”; they write that “romantic/pragmatic rhetoricians are teachers and theorists who connect private vision with public action” and that such teachers and theorists persistently seek to remake their particular situations (27). Neither Freire nor Horton ever lost his commitment to social justice, and both believed that literacy in conjunction with other factors could work to reshape social systems as well as individuals’ everyday lives. After all, in strikingly similar ways, literacy had profoundly shaped their own experiences, first as learners and later as teachers and theorists.

Records related to Horton and Freire’s meeting are collected at the Wisconsin Historical Society, including letters, manuscripts, video recordings, and other media files addressing how *We Make the Road by Walking* was produced and edited, how the production cycle took place, and how Horton’s and Freire’s theoretical and political accomplishments were ever-present as the editors worked to shape the publication. These documents provide insight into the reception of Horton and Freire’s spoken book at different stages of the production cycle. The archive includes letters from reviewers of the manuscript, including a few that directly address the spoken book’s emphasis on the educators’ sharing of their personal lives. What follows is an examination of the spoken book as a literacy narrative that fuses personal and theoretical knowledge, as well as a discussion of the educators’ ideas on theory. I then explore the process of making the “spoken book” as literacy narrative and discuss a video production related to Horton and Freire’s collaboration before I turn to their childhood literacy narratives, as expressed in *We Make the Road by Walking*. Interspersed in these accounts is supplemental archival

material on the production and review process, all designed to support my argument that an attention to personal history, through literacy narratives, can help us appreciate the ways in which literacy theories are created and evolve over time.

Making a Spoken Book and the Place of Personal History

One of the literacy narratives featured in *We Make the Road by Walking* concerns the making of the spoken book itself. Designed to encourage what Freire called “a duality in the conversation, a certain relaxation, a result of losing seriousness in thinking while talking,” the “spoken book” challenged typical academic publishing in form as well as content (4). For example, the spoken book questioned the privileging of theory, in an academic sense, and reminded readers of how theories are stories and how, sometimes, stories are theories. While discussing how books can obscure everyday life, Horton says, “A book shouldn’t be a mystery. It shouldn’t be this business of separating books from life instead of having them reflect life” (8).

The idea of bridging the gap between books and life motivated the making of *We Make the Road by Walking*, one of several spoken books coauthored by Freire and other educators in the late 1980s and early 1990s (see, for example, Shor and Freire; and Freire and Faundez). One way to bridge this gap was to create texts that spoke, as Shor explained, to the lives and needs of overworked teachers: “While every practice has a theory and vice versa, most of the research on education is not helpful in the helter-skelter hours of the real classroom” (Shor and Freire 2). Rather than being presented in the form of a traditional academic book, *We Make the Road by Walking*, like the other spoken books previously mentioned, represents a conversation that begins to blur the

boundaries between theory and lived experience. In the spoken book, when discussing how they should begin, Freire suggests that he and Horton should not begin their discussion “speaking about the objectives of education,” but should begin talking about themselves and the paths they have taken (8). Their conversations included theoretical discussions, but situated them within the many connections they made with their personal histories. In this way, Horton and Freire’s collaboration provides a unique glimpse into the distinctive and meandering paths these educators took and into their efforts to make a single “road,” so to speak, through their conversations about literacy, theory, and life. The spoken book, represented as an alternative discourse, opens up a space for new kinds of narratives, as Carlos Alberto Torres rightly contends, a space that is less restricted than those associated with academic prose, although not completely unrestricted (10).

Spoken books, like all books, need to be edited, and how one should go about editing such a text was not at all obvious given the tension between creating a free flow of ideas and assembling a final product with some sense of coherence. One reviewer who knew both Horton and Freire described the manuscript as a delight, especially to those who knew them:

The almost unedited dialogue is a delight to one familiar with both speakers. I could hear Myles’ cacophonous laughter (not included in the transcript) and see Paulo shaking his head as he frequently says, ‘for me, it is impossible.’ There is an immediacy here which is lacking in more polished texts.... One feels a part of the discussion, caught up in the unstructured leaps [that] minds make in conversation..(Highlander archives)

While the spoken book did indeed capture such leaps, its production process was far more complicated than simple transcription. Organized into six chapters—“Introduction,” “Formative Years,” “Ideas,” “Educational Practice,” “Education and Social Change,” and “Reflections”—the spoken book underwent a comprehensive editing and organization process in which authors, editors, and reviewers negotiated how best to contend with Horton’s and Freire’s efforts to situate themselves and their work. Although attempts were made to preserve the flow of the conversation, the text does not reflect the imperfections of everyday speech, with false starts and stops and overlapping voices. Not unlike pages of dialogue from a play, the spoken book as written constructs the dialogue with the authors’ names followed by their words.

Those who wrote letters in relation to the book’s production, such as the reviewer mentioned above, were primarily supporters of Horton’s and Freire’s work who wanted to be sure that the educators were represented in a way that properly acknowledged their accomplishments and theoretical vision. Echoing Horton’s hesitation about sharing an individualistic story, some reviewers were concerned that the spoken book might not give proper attention to the significance of the men’s professional work, as evidenced by this letter from a reviewer who identified himself as a “radical educator” and stressed the need for a book introduction that properly presented the “radical educators” Horton and Freire:

These men are radical educators who have given most of their lives to a commitment to fight social and economic injustice.... All of this should be situated in a way [that] does justice to the larger theoretical and political nature of their legacy. Not to do so would trivialize the nature of the

conversations and the book itself. I guess the point that I am making is that it would be a mistake, I think, to write an introduction that merely provides some personal narrative about how both of these men are terrific human beings. This kind of humanizing discourse would undercut the larger historical, political, and theoretical significance of the effects these men have had through the work they have done in the last 50 years.... The point, of course, is that these men are part of a large network of work, and not mere idols carrying out the great tradition of isolated struggle.

(Highlander archives)

One way to read this response to the manuscript is within the context of the ongoing debates around the use of the personal throughout the academy, and especially within writing studies.

The use of the personal in academic writing has generated much critique and concern, which has found expression in numerous ways, including within the taxonomies of the field throughout the 1980s (see, for example, Berlin; and Faigley) and in the Symposium Collective published in *College English* in 2001, in which Gesa Kirsch and Min-Zhan Lu expressed an interest in better understanding the various responses to the increased presence of the personal in professional narratives (Brandt, Cushman, Gere, Herrington, Miller, Villanueva, Lu, and Kirsch). Victor Villanueva, citing Freire, stressed the need for critical autobiography, for the “autobiographical mixed with the theoretical: lived experience and theory...someone saying something to someone from a particular view of reality that seeks to make that reality known” (Brandt, Cushman, Gere, Herrington, Miller, Villanueva, Lu, and Kirsch 50). Similarly, in narrating the lives of

Horton and Freire, the editors were also interested in emphasizing how Horton's and Freire's lives connected with theoretical knowledge.³¹

Such a stance toward the personal suggests that it should be used only when it serves a larger political aim or enacts a particular theoretical position. Thus critical autobiography or critical literacy narratives might feature plots that challenge cultural tropes about literacy and its power. A critical autobiography might narrate the disenfranchising effect of literacy or Graff's literacy myth, the misplaced faith in literacy as a cure-all for a host of social and economic problems. It might challenge the common belief "that English, as the language that allows for the free movement of people, goods, and services...is essential for developing countries to compete on a level playing field" (Prendergast 1). In other words, it might offer counter-narratives to the dominant stories about literacy and its benefits. Yet as Linda Brodkey reminds us, even when we privilege our theories and methods, we are still telling stories; even when we are producing ethnographic narratives, we are entering the realm of the rhetorical by producing narratives that posit a particular framework for understanding literacy ("Writing" 27).

Another way of reading literacy narratives is to blur the boundaries between theoretical knowledge and personal ways of knowing—to *not* privilege theory over experience. In doing this, theorists and teachers can critique and make visible the gross injustices that pervade literacy education, while also making a space for the affective and unexpected connections that they might make to literacy. In the spoken book, for example, theories and bodies are shown to be inseparable parts of literacy and life. Freire describes how he viewed reading as a sensual and aesthetic act, even when he was reading theorists such as Gramsci, Vygotsky, and Giroux: "Knowing for me is not a

neutral act, not only from the political point of view,” but also “from the point of view of my body, my sensual body. It is full of feeling, of emotions, of tastes” (23). Freire constructs literacy as an embodied act, describing the “physical connection” that he made with texts as a young man. Similarly, in his spoken book with Antonio Faundez, Freire discusses an early meeting with Faundez in Geneva that “was accompanied by some good Chilean wine” and *empanadas* (1). Such stories do not negate Freire’s critical pedagogy, but they do extend it by emphasizing the affective connections that are inseparable from literate practice.

When Theorists Relate Literacy Narratives

When literacy theorists relate their literacy narratives, they can recall early moments in their lives when they first began reading and writing, but it is difficult, perhaps impossible, for them to escape their current positions as theorists. As I have illustrated thus far, during the 1980s and 1990s, Freire increasingly included autobiographical details in his work, oftentimes about his early years and his personal experiences learning and teaching. This autobiographical turn offered readers insight into his ways of knowing himself and literacy. It also created a distinct forum for comparing the theorist with the theory. In 1987, the same year he met Horton, Freire coauthored *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* with Donaldo Macedo, and as part of this collaboration, he attempted to reconstruct his childhood experiences with literacy, considering memories of his earliest experiences learning to read and write:

As I began writing about the importance of the act of reading, I felt myself drawn enthusiastically to rereading essential moments in

my own practice of reading, the memory of which I retained from the most remote experiences of childhood, from adolescence, from young manhood, when a critical understanding of the act of reading took shape in me. (28)

In this passage, as in his spoken book with Horton, Freire reconstructs his literacy narrative from the perspective of an older man who is also a theorist and literacy researcher whose own life, thinking, and storytelling have no doubt been shaped by his professional development. Similarly when speaking with educators at Highlander with Horton, Freire would offer a critique of the academy who failed to appreciate the knowledge and theories that were attained beyond the academic realm, through everyday life.

Retrospective accounts of literacy like this one can be valuable because they demonstrate the stories that literacy theorists deem important. Analyzing them can help us appreciate the cultural context in which a given story takes place, while also telling something about the values and beliefs of the author. This is because both the self and the theory are made within a particular cultural-historical moment and are constantly evolving (Bruner *Actual*; Lapadat).

To hear theorists' personal histories juxtaposed with their theories is informative not only with regard to the theories, but also with regard to the particular histories from which their theories have come. Put another way, we can understand, expand, and even critique theory best if we endeavor to historicize it. *We Make the Road by Walking* is distinctive in that it elicits retrospective accounts of the educators' lives and uses the form of the spoken book to turn their stories into dialogue. While other teachers' literacy

narratives, such as Rose's, contain retrospective accounts, they tend not to take up theory so explicitly and then do not represent their stories in the form of a dialogue. The juxtaposition of theory and narrative can contribute to our understanding of literacy and language development, highlighting the values that have accrued around particular experiences and have assumed different meanings over time.

For Horton and Freire, theories were always positioned in relation to life experiences, and they needed to continuously be remade. In *The Politics of Education*, for example, Freire said, "It is impossible to export pedagogical practices without re-inventing them. Please, tell your fellow Americans not to import me. Ask them to recreate and rewrite my ideas" (xiii-xix). Freire hoped that each reader of *We Make the Road by Walking* might discover a theory in the dialogue: "Maybe he or she has a certain problem and says, 'Look maybe here is an explanation of my obstacle. There is a theory'" (99). Freire saw theory as a way to read beyond common-sense understandings.

In *We Make the Road by Walking*, Freire explicitly states that "practice is not theory. It creates knowledge, but it is not its own theory" (xx). Theory, for him, was useful when it offered insights into a particular context. He wrote,

To repeat myself, I would say that we have to go beyond the common sense of the people, with the people.... Then having a certain scientific understanding of how the structures of society work, I can go beyond the common-sense understanding of how the society works—not to stay at this level, but, starting from this, to go beyond. Theory does that. (101)

In other words, Freire was able to look at theories in their historical context and then look at them against his current reality to see if they might work, to see if they made sense in a given situation.

While Horton essentially shared Freire's appreciation of exploring multiple knowledge sources, he was far more cautious with academic theory. Theory, for him, more closely aligned with experience: "Your theory determines what you want to do in terms of helping people grow. So it's extremely important that you have a theory about it that helps you decide." This was a point that he also expressed in 1932 when recalling Highlander's early days and his initial time there. He had multiple theories, but they simply did not match what he was experiencing. He wrote, "It took only a few months to learn that we were starting the wrong way, because we weren't reaching the people" (*The Long Haul* 140). For him, theory outside of practice simply offered models to explore. Moreover, Horton was suspicious of theory, explaining to Freire: "The problem is where does that theory come from?... The only way to answer that is to test it out, as far as I know" (100). Like Jay Lemke, Horton viewed theory as a toolkit, "an assemblage of tools, not truths" (111). It was only useful to the extent that it was useful in particular contexts.

Horton's view contrasts with how theory is often privileged. He put the experience first and saw theory as useful only when it was put into practice. His resistance to academic notions of theory might have had consequences. Dale Jacobs, editor of *The Myles Horton Reader*, speculates that a reason Horton is not widely cited may be connected to his "refusal to separate education from life and life from education, seeing education instead as a lifelong process that involves experience and the whole

person” (xx). The explanation also may be Horton’s refusal to package his knowledge in a formal theory—instead preferring it to stay situated in the particular.

As Bakhtin reminds us, “language enters life through concrete utterances (which manifest language) and life enters language through the concrete utterances as well” (*Speech Genres* 63). In bringing language and life together, we are ultimately also engaging with how theories move between language and life. This sense of reconnecting literate practices, re-identifying alternative representations of literacy such as the creation of the spoken book, provides a way to identify the concrete ways in which the educators came to know theory. In support of this idea, Peter Mayo, in a review essay, described the spoken book as “an attempt by Freire to make the form suit the content and, therefore, to embody, as a writer, the pedagogical politics he has been advocating for years.” Yet despite these efforts, it is unclear just how the spoken book was received and the extent to which this blurring was welcomed.

Literacy, Narrative, and Ways of Knowing

What is striking about Horton and Freire’s dialogue is that despite their diverse histories, they find a common ground in telling their stories about literacy, struggle, and possibility. On the one hand, their stories are bound together by common tropes, familiar plots such as their sometimes epic journey to school. On the other, they demonstrate how deeply embedded and historically situated such stories are and how they can support hopeful dispositions in an ever-changing world in which consistent notions of literacy simply do not exist. Bakhtin’s notion of the *chronotope*, an idea used to analyze recurring narrative frames in novelistic discourse, provides one way to explore this tension between

stories that read in a typified fashion and those that are attentive to historically situated activity. Writing researchers have rigorously pursued Bakhtin's concept to explore the various ways in which time and place are constructed in literate practice as both embodied and representational (Hengst; Jack; Lemke; Mahiri; Prior; Prior and Shipka; Schryer). When working with literacy narratives, this framework illustrates how stories of literacy, even our most complex articulations, even literary accounts, often contain familiar narrative tropes that support articulations of theory.

When they made *We Make the Road by Walking*, Horton and Freire were older educators having a conversation as well as storytellers discussing their lived experiences with literacy. "I am sure that we will make the road by walking," suggested Freire, drawing on lines from the Spanish poet Antonio Machado that would become the book's title.³² The layering of histories, the movement between countries, and the wide-ranging dialogue pose a narrative challenge in exploring representations of time and place—which feature what some might call tropes. I use "chronotopes" rather than "tropes" because the former term encompasses the nuance of such stories, how they can simultaneously be typified (or stereotypical) and also present a particular view of history.

In describing the "literary artistic chronotope," Bakhtin tells us how "spatial and temporal indicators are fused together into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history" (*Dialogic* 84). Bakhtin also tells us that chronotopes have an "intrinsic *generic* significance" that can persist "beyond the point at which they [have] lost any meaning that was productive in actuality or adequate to later historical situations" (85). On the one hand, chronotopes

make our experiences legible: they provide “a specific form-shaping ideology for understanding the nature of events and actions” (Morson and Emerson 367). On the other, they can close off the potential for seeing beyond a static narrative in which time and history seem irrelevant. In this sense, they are political in that they attempt in varying ways and to varying degrees to represent the merging of time and space in particular narrative forms—and in doing so create a framework for what can and cannot be said. In contrast to more typical academic representations of literacy, such as a scholarly article, *We Make the Road by Walking* creates a narrative form in which theory meets the literacy narrative, opening new possibilities for representations of literacy in the spoken book and also in the video documentary that was made about it.

In the documentary *Myles Horton, Paulo Freire, and Friends Gather at Highlander*, produced in 1987, we see the many who came from both within and outside of universities to meet Horton and Freire. As the video begins, we hear the sound of gospel music and see a building, the Workshop Center of the Highlander Research and Education Center, on a hill in New Market, Tennessee. Inside, a woman is sitting behind a piano and leading a group of people in a song about the Lord and freedom. The camera moves to a mother holding her child on a rocker, and then to small clusters of people standing in conversation. A white-haired man, Horton, is signing books as adoring faces look on, while another older man, Freire, is chatting with guests. We hear the voice of a narrator who explains that Freire spent a week at Highlander “talking a book” with Horton in December of 1987. We learn that this documentary was filmed when Freire and Horton met with community members and students from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Although the video production of the meeting turned out less

professionally than had been hoped,³³ it simultaneously captures Horton and Freire's dialogue with each other and with others at Highlander, following chronological time, while registering their meeting as an opportunity for others to explore their own processes of literacy.

Prior and Shipka use the term “chronotopic lamination” to describe the complex and dispersed chains of people, places, and things that fuse together around literate practice, including storied representations like those expressed in this video. Pointing to research on storied attachments to illustrate how people selectively shape and transform their routine semiotic worlds, Prior and Shipka suggest that such attachments “appear as social (and increasingly commodified) practices that involve children and others populating their world with artifacts and experiences related to a favorite narrative or narrative world.” The many participants who gathered at Highlander and took part in this video were exploring storied ways of understanding and representing literacy and, as Horton and Freire had done, were considering their own ways of knowing—the personal paths they took to community literacy.

Like the spoken book, the video invited meta-commentary not only from Horton and Freire, but also from community members who described their own pathways to adult education. While Horton and Freire looked on, the documentary shows how adult educators were asked to make their own ways of knowing more explicit. Participants were in fact enacting the principles that would be explored throughout the spoken book. They worked in groups to create drawings that were meant to characterize what community adult education was as the educators knew it and to reflect their dreams, their visions, for adult education. The topics that came up as they spoke about their drawings

were books, CEOs, budget constraints, power, tradition, the GED, child care, churches, transportation, the university, and, of course, personal stories about literacy.

When presenting her drawing, one woman discussed her experiences living in a housing project, dropping out of school, and then enrolling in an adult education program. It was this experience, she explained, that had led to her work in adult education. This tracking of one's life through narrative, through early experiences and times, can be explained chronotopically. As Julie Hengst writes, "Locating narratives chronotopically brings multiple historical trajectories into the foreground, not only projecting a there-and-then to relate to a here-and-now, but also projecting layers of dialogic production and reception..." (116). In this way, the woman described both the broad social processes of her work and the individual affective connections that she made to her work as an adult educator, merging past histories with present concerns. Like the spoken book, this video aimed to make some ways of knowing more transparent. Such explorations suggest an alternative model for understanding and telling stories about literacy—a chronotope that privileges narrative representations of process and paths to knowing. In the video, reflecting on this activity, Freire described how academics can sometimes get such a distance from the concreteness of experience that they can "get lost." The activity of this woman and the other participants suggested a way of reclaiming an understanding of how teachers and theorists come to know particular situations.

Looking Back: Childhood Literacy Narratives

The story of a life transformed by literacy is a popular narrative and certainly one shared by many writing teachers, as discussed in chapter 1. In such narratives, we

encounter a familiar journey: a home without books, discovery of the joy of reading, the influential mentor, and so on. When represented as fables, these stories erase the histories from which they came and presented as expressing timeless truths. For this reason, literacy researchers are wary of transformative stories of literacy. But what happens when we encounter a story of transformation that is highly specific? Although such stories can appear to be representations of Graff's literacy myth in that they seem to reflect accomplishment of the impossible, they can also be particular stories told by individuals at particular times. As noted, they can appear as tropes or as situated practices.

In Horton's and Freire's childhood literacy narratives, the men repeatedly share history by providing images of time and space as they situate themselves in relation to specific social and political times. As literacy theorists relating their literacy narratives at Highlander, in making the spoken book the men take readers on a journey through their lives that fuses their particular histories. In a chapter entitled "Formative Years," the men take us to their respective childhoods, to lives of poverty, and position their narratives as those of theorists looking back across history. Moreover, as characters living out their plots, so to speak, they are speaking across their particular spaces to make a collaborative road in the form of this spoken book.

What binds these stories together is a metaphorical and material road that includes pathways to literacy. When weighted with specificity, when expressed by educators who are well aware of the material constraints under which their stories have taken place, such stories gain credibility—for when literacy narratives are told by writing teachers, there is the added dimension of the literate person returning to the schools to help others become literate. Horton's and Freire's stories transcend their meeting place at Highlander, and for

a time, the educators take us to their childhood homes, providing access to distant places where becoming literate through formal schooling was anything but easy.

Despite Horton's and Freire's childhood struggles, they maintained in their youth a commitment to the possibility that literacy, in combination with the shifting of a host of specific social conditions, might make their lives better. In narrating his early years, Freire describes how his mother found him a school. His father died when he was thirteen, and he and his family were uncertain, because of cost, whether or not he would be able to attend secondary school. He says, "My mother had to try to find a secondary school where I could start without paying. She tried a lot. Every day she left the house to search for a school. I was waiting for her, full of hope, but without being sure, and she said nothing, nothing" (26). Because his family could not afford to pay for it, his education was threatened. In this narrative, education and literacy are shown to be unequally distributed, a critical concern that resonates to this day in studies of primary and secondary education as well as in research on writing at the university level (see, for example, Kozol; Soliday, *Politics*; and Sternglass).

Freire recalls meeting his mother at the train one day, whereupon she announced that she had found him a school. A generous couple had extended support. "Until today," Freire says, "I have strong feelings of gratitude to that couple—the director...who gave me the possibility of being here today, talking with Myles" (26). This extraordinary story, by Freire's own account, was a pivotal moment in his development as a literacy educator. It is a story of transformation that almost did not happen, and one in which education and literacy provided opportunity and hope. It shows the physical space that can exist between those who have access to literacy and those who do not. It is Freire's mother's

repeated journey to the train station, on the road to gain access to literacy, that shapes Freire's story. A year after his meeting with Horton, Freire would marry Ana Maria Araújo, the daughter of the director who extended support, who herself became a literacy researcher.³⁴

Literacy narratives can involve a tension between a joyful mode of expression, including the joy of access, and the risk of denial. It is within such tensions that we begin to see the complexities of understanding literacy and the difficulty of reducing literacy narratives to moments of triumph or failure. Freire's literacy memories include moments under "mango trees" when his parents taught him to read. Born eight years before the "big crash," Freire recalls the financial struggles his family faced, including the fear of experiencing hunger (24). When Freire tells his story, we learn about literacy in Brazil and can read his story against those of others, some of whom no doubt did not have his luck in gaining access to education. Although we may read Freire's story as that of a lucky break, a fantastic turn that rescues him from a life of poverty, his story nevertheless underscores the difficulty of his circumstances, in which a lucky break was his only hope.

Horton's literacy narrative similarly emphasizes the consequences of poverty. School and literacy access were psychologically, and sometimes literally, far from home. Horton says of his childhood in Tennessee, "I was 13 or 14. And I used to ride a bony horse four miles or walk to school. We didn't have a saddle, so I got tired and sore riding that old horse. So I decided that I'd rather walk. I walked four miles there and four miles back" (16). Like Freire's, Horton's narrative includes a journey—a chronotope of the road—in which literacy is situated a long way off. Horton represents his early years as an epic passage in which a literacy educator with a humble past becomes successful and

remains committed to helping others do the same. His narrative positions school as a place worth traveling to and a location that is not accessible by all students to the same degree.

This type of narrative is “part of a familiar, if poignant, modern narrative, a tale of backwardness transformed, fetters broken, in the light-and-might of knowledge and schooling” (Collins and Blot 112-13). James Collins and Richard Blot critique the dichotomy that frequently surfaces in narratives of literacy between home and school, between neighborhood and education. They argue that “[l]iteracy educators should remain skeptical” of these stories and attempt to blur the dichotomy” (113). This advice, while perhaps useful in particular instances, can undermine the material disparities that exist across locations. To blur the dichotomy would be to deny the very real ways in which locations are experienced by many, including educators such as Horton and Freire.

When Horton was born in 1905, his parents were schoolteachers, although they did not have much more education than the people they were teaching (13). “That’s important,” explained Horton,

because I think that’s probably the basis of my interest in education, having parents who were teachers to start with. Before I was school age, they were no longer teaching because the requirements had increased to where you had to have one year high-school education before you could teach. They couldn’t afford to go back to school and get that education; therefore they had to stop teaching. But that interest stayed on. (13)

When Horton’s father lost his job teaching, he took on several manual-labor jobs before getting the position of circuit county clerk. Horton explains: “The reason he got elected to

that office was that he was one of the few people in the county who could write legibly—which I never learned to do! ... Later on when more people learned to write, he lost his job...” (13). In this narrative, Horton illustrates the shifting of the value placed on writing and the tenuous connections between literacy and employment.³⁵ Like Freire, he provides a narrative that resists a reading of simple critique or celebration. The particulars of his life, such as having parents who were teachers for a time in Appalachia, enrich our understanding of his theoretical vision. Literacy comes and goes in the form of teaching positions for his parents and in his literal journey on the road to school.

Later in the text of *We Make the Road by Walking*, Horton returns to his love of reading and tells how he did not have money to buy books and had to find other ways to gain access to them. One way was through his cousin’s bookshelf, which satisfied his insatiable and once indiscriminate thirst for reading material. He also remembers how his brother Delmas and he found out that

you could order books[,] five books for a dollar from Sears and Roebuck catalog, and if they didn’t have the books you ordered, they’d send you other books.... So we never liked any book they sent us! We used one dollar for two years. Just kept sending them back. We didn’t care what they sent us, and we figured out that they were such a big outfit that they’d never check. They finally found out and said there weren’t any more for our dollar. But they gave us the books. (228-29)

The materiality and economics of literacy are woven into this narrative about the power of words as it worked in the making of this literacy educator. Books served as a source of pleasure and, sometimes, intellectual nourishment for Horton. The transfer of books back

and forth between Sears and Roebuck and Horton and his brother underscores the economic barriers that existed between Horton and literacy, and the extent to which he learned to negotiate the system to his own advantage. Class barriers no doubt limited Horton's access to literacy education, but they also created an exigency for Horton to blur and transcend those boundaries.

Reflecting on their childhood experiences, Horton and Freire perceive a value in literacy, one that is intimately connected with their parents' belief in education, which helped them to begin their journeys. As we read their stories in the format of the spoken book, we are aware that these speakers are accomplished literacy educators, that their professional commitments are interwoven with this narrative. As Jerome Bruner describes it, "Our self-making stories accumulate over time, even pattern themselves on conventional genres" (*Making Stories* 65). Over time, stories "get out-of-date," not simply because of the passage of time but also "because our self-making stories need to fit new circumstances, new friends, new enterprises" (*Making Stories* 65). As Horton and Freire make their road by walking, they are reconstructing their childhood stories from the vantage point of long-term literacy educators.

Process and Possibility

"... I don't like the beginning of the dialogue where Paulo and Myles seem to go on forever about why the conversation between them should be taken up as a talking book. It is repetitive, awkward, and at odds with the principles that inform the book," wrote one reader of an early draft of the manuscript (Highlander archives). Although the manuscript was subsequently trimmed to omit some references to other spoken books and

to how technology was mediating the conversation, the text and video still preserved much of that conversation. Yet this reviewer's response captures an ongoing tension that was present in the production of the spoken book over which details to include and which to exclude. Because the spoken format was somewhat unconventional, at least for some reviewers, it opened up new ways of telling stories about literacy and theories of literacy.

A central goal of this chapter has been to highlight the tensions that arose within the text and around the educators' efforts to dramatize their ways of knowing through a diverse set of literacy narratives. While all literacy narratives are to some extent embodied and representational, both local and global, they are not always delivered or received in the same way. In the expressions of Horton and Freire, the personal is never just personal. Their literacy narratives remind us that when literacy theorists tell stories, they must endure the weight of their theories.

As educators who have staked their careers on cultivating *critical literacies* among citizens of communities who have been disenfranchised, Horton and Freire remained committed to a sense of possibility that surfaced in their narrative dialogues across space and time. As we move through the text, we see numerous examples, as I have shown, of dialogic exchange: two men traveling on separate journeys and then coming together to form a shared narrative of literacy. Such sharing is tied to a critical awareness of possibility.

A belief in hope, as Henry Giroux explains, has not been characteristic of radical educational theory (204). In *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*, Linda Flower similarly suggests the need to extend the work beyond critique: "The effort to discover and describe, to enact and revise what a *transformative more* could be, is one

of the most energetically exploratory agendas to emerge in our field” (1). This sentiment that it is necessary to move beyond critique, coming from scholars as diverse as Giroux and Flower, is indicative of a growing need in educational theory and writing studies research for exploration of new practices, new dispositions.

When educators tell personal stories about literacy, when they narrate their own lives, they provide readers with a plot line in which literacy education matters. Horton and Freire’s spoken book and the conversations surrounding it demonstrate how personal history can enrich and sometimes expand theoretical knowledge, though it can also create anxiety for readers when theorists write beyond the theories upon which they have built their reputations. Such shifts destabilize not only the theory, but also the theorist as someone with a consistent point of view. In *We Make the Road by Walking*, Horton and Freire offer richer, more nuanced accounts of literacy through their own practices and through their ongoing rearticulation of what literacy is and what it does. They remind us that theories, too, have histories.

Notes

³¹ Of course, the place of the personal has been a topic of discussion across disciplines from anthropology to sociology. For a discussion of the personal in scientific representations, see Charles Bazerman’s “Intertextual Self-Fashioning: Gould and Lewontin’s Representations of the Literature.”

³² In the Highlander archives is a copy of the poem, and highlighted are the words “no hay camino, / se hace camino al andar / Al andar se hace camino.” A handwritten note beside the lines reads that *camino* can be translated to mean both *way* and *road* (Highlander archives).

³³ In an undated letter from George Stoney to editor John Gaventa, Stoney apologized for the technical execution. The VHS ½” had produced a quality that was less than desirable, and the two students who had worked with him were by his account less experienced than he had thought. Still, he reasoned, if they kept in mind “that this is for the transmission of knowledge rather than to substitute as a ‘media event’ designed for broadcasting, it can be sufficient” (Highlander archives).

³⁴ See Ana Maria Araújo Freire’s *Chronicles of Love: My Life with Paulo Freire* for her reflections on their union.

³⁵ See also the work of Deborah Brandt on the tenuous connection between literacy and economics.

Frame 3: Literacy and Personal History: Into the Prison Classroom

Chapter 5

Doing Time with Literacy Narratives

In a writing class at a medium-high security prison, fourteen men were getting ready to read aloud the opening sentences of their employment cover letters. In a raised voice, Juan³⁶ began, “I am writing in response to the advertisement placed on monster.com.”

Forgetting for a moment that the men did not have access to the Internet, I asked Juan if this was an advertisement he had seen recently. “Come on now,” he responded, shaking his head. “I made it up.”

A few minutes later, William read from his letter: “Not only am I familiar with the regulations which qualify goods as halal, but I also have experience as an assistant manager at Publix.” When I asked him to tell the class and me about his experiences as an assistant manager, he replied with some hesitation that he had made his story up, too.

Leaving class, Juan turned to me and said, “Don’t you know that many of us are going to have to flip burgers?”

This episode captures one of the many dramas of literacy that play out across boundary spaces, like this prison classroom, in which writing is implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, linked to upward mobility and a renewed sense of self. Such assurance, as Juan reminds us, is often a far cry from the material, economic, and social hardships confronting incarcerated students. Stories of the power of literacy, so pervasive

in popular and scholarly forums, can read like the pipe dreams of those who fail to see the limitations on what literacy can make possible. Yet they can also help us see how individuals construct what Jerome Bruner calls “self-making” and “world-making” narratives around notions of reading and writing (“Self-Making,” 61).

When writing teachers enter the classroom, they often bring with them a deep faith in the power of literacy to rectify social inequalities and improve their students’ social and economic standing. It is this faith—this hope for change—that draws some writing teachers to locations of social and economic hardship, and often connects the narratives these instructors ask students to write to the teachers’ own stories about literacy and possibility. In this chapter, I continue my exploration of literacy narratives and suggest that they can function as a heuristic for tracing beliefs about literacy between teachers and students, both inside and outside the prison-industrial complex, and that they can also help educators to appreciate the multifaceted, sometimes contradictory ways in which writing accrues value in our lives.

“I have to admit,” wrote Juan, reflecting on his cover letter assignment, “that I initially wanted to have fun with this one. I wanted to make you the owner of a nightclub, and [say that] I was looking for a bouncer job, or [to be a] DJ.” Although he imagined that he might eventually be “flipping burgers,” he remained dedicated to writing, which for him had a purpose far beyond preparation for work. “Anybody who is able to obtain higher education while incarcerated,” he wrote, “will testify that it does something to you.” His complex understanding of what writing does and does not do demonstrates a hopeful and sometimes playful, yet critical relationship with literacy that resists easy classification.

As definitions of literacy change over time and from place to place, so do definitions of the literacy narrative.³⁷ If “literate activity is about nothing less than ways of being in the world, forms of life,” as Prior and Shipka contend, then literacy narratives are also about the “(re)formation of persons and social worlds, about affect and emotion, will and attention” (181). Such stories surface both in classroom discourse, as the opening scenario indicates, and in student writing. In the context of a prison, such stories are intensified, as the “(re)formation of persons” is often tied to narratives of rehabilitation. When teachers of inmates or formerly incarcerated students, for instance, juxtapose their students’ stories with their own personal histories, we see again and again the great hope placed in literacy, which cuts across socioeconomic boundaries. While maintaining a critical stance toward overly optimistic accounts, we need to find ways to allow for narratives of possibility in which literacy does connect with social change.

Mike Rose is one instructor who demonstrates the effects of teachers’ narratives of possibility in his writings about his work with incarcerated students. In his 2009 *Why School?* Rose questions the fundamental value of school and introduces readers to Anthony, a community college student in a basic-skills program who had spent time in prison and whose former parole officer was the dean of his school. In his celebrated *Lives on the Boundary*, Rose describes teaching Willie Oates, a veteran and ex-con who spent two years in a federal penitentiary lifting weights and hungrily reading literature. Alongside both accounts runs that of Rose’s own discovery of reading, writing, and teaching. Such narrative juxtaposition reminds readers that literacy is never solely about acquiring skills or gainful employment, but is also about learning to use writing as a pathway toward understanding oneself in the world.

While working with students at what I am calling the Midwest Correctional Center and listening to their stories, I found myself thinking about my own experiences with literacy as related to my father's imprisonment. I have chosen to interweave my own narrative with my qualitative research in order to highlight the common humanity that unites students and teachers.³⁸ Recognizing this shared humanity enables me to do more than simply relate my literacy narrative or situate myself in my research. Instead, following Gesa Kirsch and Joy Ritchie, I theorize my location and examine my "experiences as reflections of ideology and culture, by reinterpreting" them with and against the experiences of others (8). Literacy narratives present an excellent opportunity for such reflection.

Too often, literacy narratives begin and end with a celebration of literacy—a celebratory rhetoric that fails to challenge cultural tropes (Eldred and Mortensen). At the same time, I was mindful of rhetoric that denied possibility. The tension between these two rhetorics, as I have explored throughout this study, was precisely what characterized my experience, so my prison research provided an opportunity to reflect on my own hopes about literacy and explore with inmate students our specific beliefs about what literacy had given us and what it might provide in the future.

When I first identified the prison as a site of study, I wanted to know in what ways the teaching of advanced writing mattered to students. I wanted to work in a prison because I had been intrigued by narratives that depicted writing as transformative in struggles to achieve social justice (Jacobi; Kerr; Pompa). If there was any hope offered by literacy, I supposed, the prison would invoke questions of possibility in students' narratives by influencing how they represented literacy and themselves.

For some educators (see, for example, Torre and Fine), prison writing proves that language and literacy can transform lives. Others go further and assert that the academy can learn from those in prison. In “Can the Penitentiary Teach the Academy How to Read?” H. Bruce Franklin points to the considerable body of work created by American prisoners, most of whom acquired literate skills in prison through self-education (643). Among the most notable examples is Malcolm X, whose literacy narrative is now frequently excerpted in composition readers, often with the intention of inspiring students to interrogate their own histories with reading and writing.³⁹ Franklin also cites Jimmy Santiago Baca, whose success as a poet and writer led to his becoming a teacher and “giving others the opportunity to read and write” (645). Like Malcolm X, Baca testifies to the power of language with a narrative of a struggling student who relies on language and literacy to change; Baca then describes how he teaches others in similar circumstances.⁴⁰

Similar claims appear in government reports, such as the U.S. Department of Education’s 1994 National Adult Literacy Survey’s *Literacy Behind Prison Walls*, which contributes to the popular belief that literacy changes lives for the better by suggesting a correlation between illiteracy and criminality. More directly, the report suggests that “unless their [literacy] skills can be improved considerably,” inmates will have diminished chances to obtain employment (xiii). In considering prisoners’ experiences prior to entering prison, the report suggests that, in general, they attain lower levels of education than their parents did. The redemptive rhetoric of literacy is evident in the report’s opening:

Literacy and education are keys to opportunity in this society, and perhaps no one realizes this more clearly than prisoners. An inmate in a maximum-

security prison reflected on the importance of learning and literacy in this way. “When I first came [to prison] I had a negative attitude. I didn’t write. I didn’t want to go to school. I didn’t think it mattered.” His views were changed, however, by another prisoner who was involved in postsecondary education. “He tried to show me how education would help me inside, even more than in the eyes of someone else,” this prisoner said. His life in prison changed once he began to take classes. “It made me feel good about myself and gave me hope as to what I could be.” (Haigler, Harlow, O’Connor, and Campbell 1)

As a literacy researcher sympathetic to the principles of the New Literacy Studies, as has been evident throughout this study, I have been taught to be wary of overdetermined claims that align literacy with employment, to resist overly simplistic and autonomous claims about the power of the written word. Even if literacy is redemptive to some, we know that it can also be used to exclude—even to engage in the kind of violence that J. Elspeth Stuckey described nearly twenty years ago.⁴¹ Yet in the space of the prison classroom, where higher education programs are under persistent assault, it is no longer enough to criticize literacy for what it does not do without also articulating its value—or potential value.⁴² An interest in exploring the space between hope and critique, between students and myself, led me to a program called Project Justice and to a consideration of the work of narrative, particularly narratives about literacy.⁴³

Writing for a Change: The Class, the Activity

Project Justice is a university-based program in the Midwest committed to the belief that higher education in prison can reduce recidivism and improve life prospects for the incarcerated and their families. Whether its educators are developing a “writing across the curriculum” workshop, orchestrating a student-led symposium, or working one-on-one with students in the resource room at the prison, Project Justice has created opportunities for an innovative and interdisciplinary curriculum. Upper-level courses are offered once per week at the Midwest Correctional Center. In a volunteer-supported resource room open twice a week, students may conduct research, work one-on-one with tutors, type papers, or simply spend time reading.

Under Project Justice’s auspices, every Friday afternoon in the spring of 2009 I met with the students in my advanced writing course. In contrast to many university undergraduates, my students at the Midwest Correctional Center never missed a class and were unfailingly vocal participants in every three-hour session. The course, “Writing for a Change: For Business, for Life,” combined theories of composing with rhetorical strategies for business communication and culminated in both a class publication and a symposium of student work. Students wrote poems, literacy narratives, proposals, and résumés. A considerable portion of their writings focused on the value of higher education in prison.

All the men in this program and in this study had earned the equivalent of an associate’s degree and were, by and large, “literate” in the conventional sense of the word before they entered prison and no doubt according to the NALS standards. Writing, for them, was not simply about learning skills, although that played a part; for them, more

importantly, writing entailed a recreating of themselves at different points of their lives. Too often, as Anita Wilson points out, “[t]here is almost a universal theory that illiteracy and criminality are synonymous,” which is what she rightly calls a “gross misjudgment” that results from narrow assessment measures” (“Speak Up” 96). She observes that “conventional instruments used to assess prisoners’ literacy abilities pay little attention to social context and thus have little validity” (96). In contrast, literacy narratives make possible the construction of a deeper, more valid assessment, one that showcases students’ literate abilities while enabling them to communicate about the material and cultural constraints that have impinged on their literacy learning and practice.

The prison environment creates distinct spatial and temporal boundaries that shape literate practice. Inmates are told when to eat, when to sleep, and sometimes even when to write. Writing under such constraints, and sometimes in defiance of them, inmate students often produce narratives of freedom, movement, and transformation. Their narratives, read as both artifact and activity, demonstrate how language is used to move beyond obstacles imposed in one’s past and advance toward future goals. Literacy narratives can speak to time and place in historically and spatially specific ways. Bakhtin’s notion of the chronotope, as discussed in chapter 4, helps us to see how representations of time and place merge with specific social and historical accounts of reading and writing (*Dialogic*). As one student, Louis, explained in his poem “Travelin”:

I go where I choose

Leave when ready

I can deal with the here & now

OR

escape when it gets too heavy

These talents be my balance

—between

smart and stupid.

The climax is most cool

when the groove is so fluid

Poetic accounts like Louis's become more poignant when we know that the narrator cannot physically go where he chooses or "leave when ready." His sense of being in control, transcending time and place, reflects the power of words to create what Dorothy Holland and her colleagues call "figured worlds"—that is, alternative visions of the world constructed by individuals using language—in this case, worlds within and beyond the prison (49). In his narrative poem, Louis can leave the "here & now" or "escape when it gets too heavy." If, as I believe, all stories are to some extent "figured worlds" that shape and are shaped by the "real world," then by attending to the work of narrative, we can move beyond the question of whether a story is true or false and into a realm wherein it is appropriate to ask how the apparent truth of a narrative is constructed.

Drawing on Bakhtin's work, Holland and her colleagues write, "People tell others who they are, but even more important, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are" (3). The layering of histories, childhood memories, and professional identities is indisputable if we share Bakhtin's belief that language carries the freight of history and enables multiple readings. But these stories are not solely historical artifacts. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue, although "autobiographical

narratives may contain ‘facts,’ they are not factual history about a particular time, person, or event” (10). Reading narratives like Louis’s provides access to the multiple ways in which individuals give coherence and meaning to their stories—and their lives. What follows is a series of vignettes that explore beliefs about literacy and incarceration through the juxtaposition of narratives—cultural and personal, my own as well as my students’. Through such stories, we can see narrative renderings of specific times and places—in which the prison plays a part—and the affective links that formed among students and also between them and their teacher. The goal of this exploration is to demonstrate how literacy narratives can illuminate the configuration of reading and writing in and around the prison-industrial complex.

Writing to Project, Writing to Remember

During the spring of 2009, the men in my advanced writing course arrived in a group, as usual, for the last meeting of the semester. At 5 p.m. that Friday, as I had done many times before, I began class with a writing exercise. Students were asked to spend a few minutes creating a scene that placed them in the future. With pens, pencils, and paper, they worked quietly for a few minutes and then began to share their words aloud. After each reading, there were smiles, applause, and sometimes laughter. William imagined himself getting an award for his work as a poet and artist serving youth in his community. Juan read, “The one thing I pray to God every night is to bless me with a wife who would love me unconditionally, one whom I can have children and grow old with.”

Then Anthony stood up and read his composition, which placed him in 2020, two years after his release. Like Louis, he too portrayed himself as a traveler; he saw himself as an owner of a “biological toxins business,” passing through a small west Texas town:

[T]here is no way I would rather spend my time than hiking around outside with my 17 year old son, James, and my trusty Australian Shepherd, Catcher, as my companions while I search for rattlesnakes and coral snakes. I hardly even remember the 13 years and 9 months I spent in the [Midwest Correctional Center], except to acknowledge all that I learned about human nature...others['] and my own. This evening, as the sun sets, we will eat a meal of broiled shrimp, spinach salad, and fresh steamed asparagus while enjoying our time together. Catcher will be a pain in the ass, because that is what he does best whenever food is being prepared. James will be urging me to finish the food preparation so that we can eat and get down to playing some heads-up poker. And me...I will be taking in each moment as the treasure that it truly is. My son still doesn't really get why I tear up each time I look at him. My dog just wants some food and for me to rub his belly. I just want time to stop so that I can make the moment last forever.

Throughout the semester, Anthony had written about his son, whom he desperately missed. Much of his writing was linked to a future in which he dreamed that he could remake himself and be with his son. As Anthony read the last few sentences of his essay, he began to cry, the first time I had seen tears all semester. The sound of his sobbing

filled the room. We clapped, not knowing what else to do, but it did not feel right to me. Michael put his arm on Anthony's shoulder. There was silence.

Anthony's story conjured an imaginary unbounded landscape where he could be a successful businessman, an adventurer, and a father; where he could be there for his son. As I contemplated his words, I could not help thinking about my own experiences with my father, who spent much of his adult life moving in and out of prison. Occasionally he would write from prison, and less frequently I would respond. Anthony's story brought back the memory of a time more than twenty years earlier.

Just as I was beginning college, my father, released from prison, was living in a flophouse on Manhattan's Lower East Side. As he had in the past, he was drinking heavily. This was the end of the 1980s, after the stock market crash, and the neighborhood had more than its share of abandoned buildings, drug addicts, and homeless men and women. In just a few years, Mayor Rudy Giuliani would begin his campaign to identify the city's "homeless, panhandlers, prostitutes, squeegee cleaners, [and] squatters" as "the major enemies of public order and decency" and pave the way for the gentrification of such areas (N. Smith 3). I was beginning my undergraduate studies on the North Shore of Long Island, in an affluent enclave far removed from both the Lower East Side and Gravesend, the working-class Brooklyn neighborhood where I had lived with my mother, sister, and maternal grandparents since the age of three. My father was on my mind a lot during this time, and sometimes he would find his way into my schoolwork, in both language and image. Just as Anthony's son would emerge in Anthony's writings, I found my father in mine.

I could not have known then the compassionate role that my writing teacher would play then and would continue to play over the following years. Dr. Joan Digby directed my university's honors program, taught first-year composition, and had a reputation for expecting a great deal of her students. During a course of independent study with her, I attempted to write and rewrite a scene from my life about a desperate, unsuccessful effort to rescue my father. My account, as I will later show, was less a story about my learning to read and write than it was a story about compassion made possible within the intimate space created by reading and writing.

“Compassion is always, at its most authentic, about a shift from the cramped world of self-preoccupation into a more expansive place of fellowship, of true kinship,” writes Gregory Boyle, a pastor and founder of Homeboy Industries, an organization that provides gang members and at-risk youth with employment opportunities (77). As other students responded to Anthony's story, I took note of the literacy narrative that was emerging off the page in this class: one bound by compassion and, for a brief time, removed from the temporal and spatial limitations of prison life. I saw the students, I saw my father, and I saw a great faith in the power of language to impact what was happening in this prison classroom.

Meeting the Students of Project Justice

Four months earlier, on a gray Friday afternoon, as I was driving to the prison, I passed the Caffè Paradiso. Through the glass storefront, I saw university students seated at wooden tables in front of laptops and lattes; I myself often studied there. Now, leaving

the Paradiso behind, I found myself on the way to teach writing to my new students, incarcerated men. From the highway, I saw cornfields, and my mind drifted to another time, many years earlier, when at the age of seventeen I had visited my own father in New York State's Sing Sing prison.

After walking on a slant into the visiting room, my father walked up to me and asked me if I was his son. About five years had passed since I had last seen him. I was not sure whether his question had resulted from my having changed so much or from his not knowing what else to say. This was the first time I had entered a prison.

On this January night, I would be visiting a prison not as a son, but as a teacher and researcher, a few days before the first day of class. After exiting the highway, I saw a sign for the community college to the left, but not one for the Midwest Correctional Center, which was on the right, across the street from a little white house. I emptied my pockets in the car, removing my cell phone and wallet. Even my laptop was left behind, replaced by a notebook and pen. The guard took my license, handed me my visitor identification badge, and began what would become routine procedure: the scanning of my belongings and my being queried as to whether I had a cell phone or weapon. I then passed through a series of unlocking and relocking doors before walking across a courtyard to the education building, which also housed the gym and art studio.

Often teachers and researchers recount scenes of passing through barbed or razor wire (see, for example, D. Wilson) and encountering guards who may resent the fact that inmate students are provided more opportunities for education than they themselves may

have had (Coggeshall). At the Midwest Correctional Center I, too, had such experiences, but they were not what stayed with me. Instead, what resonated most with me was how the space resembled many university classrooms in which I had taught. Like other classrooms, this one had three walls of blackboard space, chairs with desk arms, windows along the back wall, and even an old TV and DVD player.

On this day, we instructors and some other guests formed a semicircle around the front of a classroom in the education building. In the audience were the future Project Justice students, who had just registered for their courses. Four classes were being offered with focuses on literature, along with two centering on landscape architecture and my class on “writing for a change.” The director of the program told me that my course had been one of the most popular selections. Compared to the courses in history and literature, my offering likely appeared the most practical, which had no doubt contributed to its popularity.

With few exceptions, the men were African Americans of widely varying ages, and they were filled with questions about the courses, what they might learn, and how this work might help them in the future. As Angela Davis and others have noted, the predominance of African Americans in the prison-industrial complex⁴⁴ has intensified over the years, and this sometimes made the students’ questions about possibility difficult to answer.

“Can you teach me how to write a proposal?” asked Benny, an African-American man with long hair that was pulled back and a friendly smile. I asked what he wished to write a proposal for, but Benny was unsure. I explained how difficult it was to teach writing out of context, a point that I would appreciate further as the semester continued

and I saw how students often attempted to reconstruct contexts and worlds that in some ways had changed a great deal since they were first incarcerated.

I would also later learn how Benny urgently sought the identity of a businessman as well as recognition for his way with words. In an essay, he recalled an ambivalent encounter with the “good book”: “My initial writing experience occurred inadvertently by way of what my family called the good book. As a child, I was in awe of this book, and I sensed my parents were in awe of it too. I often heard them say, ‘The good book said this, the good book said that.’ I never heard the good book say anything!” As Benny’s story continued, he explained how his parents were illiterate and that it had been his older sister, already a college student, who had taught him how to read and write. In the second grade, he remembered noticing the “smell of new books and illustrations,” which “made the words easy to learn,” and he also remembered the teacher who had not seen his potential. When he confessed that he aspired to be a businessman, she angrily charged, “You’ll never be a businessman—a janitor maybe!” Benny had never fully understood why his teacher, his “hero,” had responded “with such wrath,” a wrath that led him to hide “under the porch of [his] dilapidated house” for days on end until his mother found him.

If there is a lesson to this story, Benny tells us, it is that he learned to face “most situations and circumstances head on,” and not to hide. While admiring his persistence, I was well aware of the social and economic challenges that he faced and would later face. Benny, like many of the students in my class, grew up in Chicago’s inner city. Unemployment rates in inner cities, as William Julius Wilson and others have shown, tend to far exceed those of other locations. Too often, as Angela Davis writes, the prison-

industrial complex has functioned to artificially lower unemployment statistics: “Mass incarceration is not a solution to unemployment, nor is it a solution to the vast array of social problems that are hidden away in a rapidly growing network of prisons and jails” (“Reflections”). The adult Benny wrote against the words of a teacher who had rejected him and a society that limited his potential to become a businessman.

Stories like Benny’s exemplify a familiar narrative in prison accounts and in literacy narratives more generally—that of metamorphosis. By carefully attending to the literacy narratives written by the incarcerated, we can see narrative framing used to chronicle a process of becoming. “Metamorphosis serves as the basis for a method of portraying the whole of an individual’s life in its more important moments of *crisis*: for showing *how an individual becomes other than what he was*,” writes Bakhtin, in one particular type of representation of time and space, a chronotope (*Dialogic* 115).⁴⁵ Benny’s troubled experiences in school taught him never to hide. He constructed a story in which a new Benny emerged, wherein literacy was fused with a sense of rebirth and uplift as past and present merged in the sense that “a narrator, in the here and now, takes upon himself or herself the task of describing the progress of a protagonist in the there and then, one who happens to share his name” (Bruner, “Self-Making,” 69). Such narratives’ chronology is organized around exceptional moments in a life such as a struggle in school, the discovery of books, and the making of a new self with a renewed sense of value and purpose. Indeed, Benny’s story reminded me of my own formative years in school, from which an autograph album spoke to me about a father’s hope and the racialized contexts in which literacy learning takes place.

From Midwest Correctional Center to Gravesend

In 1978, I graduated from P.S. 95 in Brooklyn. I have an autograph album of folded, pastel-colored pages. My father's words are written on the first leaf: "Pat, I know you are good at every-thing. So I hope you can be better then me. Best wishes. Love, Dad." The English teacher in me sees the grammatical errors of this man who had spent much of his adult life moving in and out of prison.

The second page of the album is inscribed by someone named Officer Paul, who writes, "To Pat Jr., Roses are Red / Violets are Blue/ For the Sake of the Italians / Don't Marry a Jew." I did not know Officer Paul, and my father probably did not, either. These inscriptions were likely composed at a bar in Gravesend, a working-class community where celebrating Italian ethnicity and disparaging others was, and to some extent still is, all too common. In *Crossing Ocean Parkway*, Marianna De Marco Torgovnick describes the prejudice in nearby Bensonhurst:

Italian Americans in Bensonhurst are notable for their cohesiveness and provinciality; the slightest pressure turns those qualities into prejudice and racism.... Jews are suspect but (the old Italian women admit) 'they make good husbands.' The Irish are okay, fellow Catholics, but not really 'like us'; they make bad husbands because they drink and gamble. (7)

In the pages of the album, we can see traces of hope, a narrative that looks ahead but is nevertheless tainted with the racist words of Officer Paul from more than two decades ago. My father did not gamble, but he certainly did drink, fulfilling the stereotype that Torgovnick describes. I would not see him for a while after graduation.

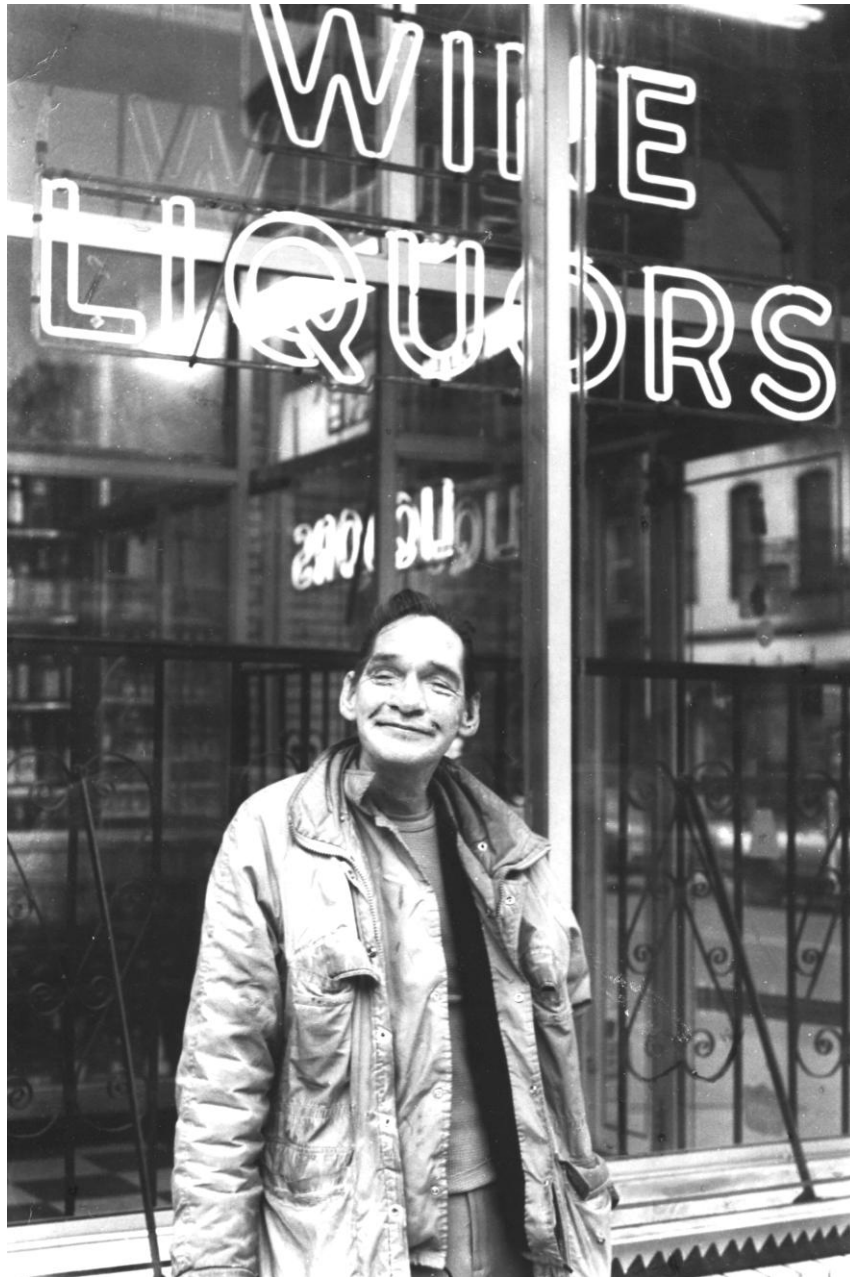


Figure 1: My father on the Lower East Side, circa 1987.

With a 35mm rented camera, for a photography class in 1987, I photographed the men and women who were scattered along the streets of the Lower East Side of New York City, many of whom were homeless and suffering from some form of addiction. I could not bring myself to tell my classmates or my photography teacher that the photo

above was of my father, just a few months after his latest release from prison. In the picture, with his wry smirk and soiled clothing, he stands in front of the words that spell out what has led to his downfall. And yet, rather than seeking to present himself as a success, he is smirking at his son who is taking pictures for a class project. He knows exactly where he is standing. He is, in fact, helping me construct a story about alcohol and homelessness, and he is well aware of the ironic positioning of these words behind his back and their significance in his life. It is a defiant representation that captures the not-so-optimistic times that followed my father's release. This photograph of my father suggests to me someone who has given up hope, a position in sharp contrast to that of the students in my class, who were focused on how the future might be better.

Literacy and the Cracker Jack Prize

During the first week of class, I sat at home pondering my students' handwritten letters of introduction, in which they told me about their experiences as writers. Many of them discussed the importance of literacy and writing, often making explicit connections between their compositions and the power to connect to others. Michael, a gentle-mannered man with a love for art, explained that knowing how to write sometimes offered him the only way he could reach out. "Prisoners are often faced with the problem of figuring out how to write what they mean," he explained. "If no one has a phone for the inmate to call, [then] aside from a visit, writing will be the only communication. If an inmate has trouble expressing [himself or herself] verbally, the old trusty written language is the last resort." For Michael, the issue was how inmate students might cultivate the rhetorical skills needed to say what they really meant. When the spoken

word proved too difficult, “the old trusty written language” proved a viable alternative, just as, I would later learn, painting had become another modality of expression for him.

Michael’s words reminded me of how the functions of writing are always evolving to suit particular needs, as well as of how my position as his teacher might be influencing what he wrote. In his letter, for example, he recounted a fifth-grade literacy victory when he had submitted a winning letter in a contest while attending Catholic school in inner-city Chicago. He and a friend had been selected as finalists, with the prize being a tour of the Cracker Jack Company: an exciting proposition for a fifth grader, especially because there was the potential for receiving more than the typical Cracker Jack prize. He wrote, “The ‘Cracker-Jack’ Company decided that they would pick two children from Chicago’s inner-city, according to the letter they received from each individual explaining, ‘Why I’m the best choice for the tour of the Cracker Jack factory.’”

Two weeks after submitting his entry, he remembered sitting at his desk in school, “trying desperately to get the sticky wrapper from around a piece of ‘Jungle Jolly,’” in defiance of the class rule against eating candy in class, when he was summoned by the teacher. He walked to the front of the room, suspecting that he was being called out for his “sneaky candy antics.” In fact, he was being singled out because he had won the contest and, as he explains, he became the pride of his school. “The realization of the power of words impacted my life from that point on,” he says. Like Benny, Michael imagined writing as a means for moving away from the everyday, from childhood struggles to triumphs, seeing composition as being simultaneously about writing and about self-formation. The reconfiguration of location in such stories—the crossing from

one place to another, the time-traveling—is shadowed by an awareness that these are the expressions of one who, though he has become a writer and artist, is incarcerated.

In another piece of writing, “Creating Art Through Writing: My Experiences as a Child,” Michael described sitting in the second-floor cafeteria at Malcolm X College while his mother went to class. Once she left, he exited “the cafeteria, and the halls...seem[ed] to go on forever” until he found a plethora of African art, works that captured his imagination. In describing one painting, he cast himself in a scene: “I felt like I was actually standing in the village with the dark, Prussian blue sky, swallowing up the scene, as the sun, long set behind the yellow ochre straw huts, disappear[ed] far off to the right.” In relaying this story, Michael reflected on how he had told his mother about his joy and recognized his yearning to write down his feelings. “Thirty years later,” he said, “I am an artist and a writer, still in love with these two different art forms, designed to do the same thing, create a picture” (62).

Prison Time: Finding a Third Space

To resolve the tension between institutional worlds and personal agency, inmate students often construct literacy narratives in which the prison is renegotiated as another space, what Anita Wilson calls a “third space.”⁴⁶ For some of my students, prison was a place to transcend the unbearable, and education helped to facilitate such escape (“Four Days” 74). In “Time Served Me,” one student, James, remembered “an unusually cold morning in January” in the mid-1990s when he had arrived at the Illinois Department of Corrections. After having spent two years in “one of the most dangerous places on earth,” the Cook County Jail, James was on a bus to a maximum-security prison. “Don’t serve

time, make time serve you”—these words, he explained, hung above the education building. “Where else can you make time serve you other than the school building?” he asked. For another student, Jeffrey, the prison was itself a university. “Imagine being in a university in which there are several gun towers, / people inside them, bearing arms, to maintain order and display power,” he wrote. Rather than being a celebration of education, however, Jeffrey’s poem displays the ambiguity of its meaning in prison:

Most would not refer to these institutions as universities, but only as prisons.

I refer to them as universities because in here my knowledge has risen.

In here, you have all the time in the world to contemplate and seek knowledge,
read, write, think, and observe as if you were in college.

Please don’t mistake this, though, to mean that everything in here is fine,
because though I refer to these institutions as universities,
we are still doing time.

Despite his having the time to write, Jeffrey reminded readers that he was nevertheless within the space of a prison. If, as Anita Wilson suggests, students like Jeffrey have constructed a third space, it is one in which transcendence is not entirely possible.

There is irony, write María Elena Torre and Michelle Fine, in the fact that the power of education is found in such an unlikely space (89).⁴⁷ The stories presented here, both my own and those of my students, testify to a critical hope and a compassionate stance toward higher education in prison. In this closing vignette, I come back to my own story, to a time when I shared a picture of my father with Dr. Digby, my writing teacher, and told her that I hoped to write a story of a meeting that had taken place between my father and his mother-in-law on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, a turning point of

sorts in my own life. I provide here an excerpt from this piece of writing to illuminate the compassion that can result from our attempting to get our stories right at turning points, and how the impact of such moments crosses spatial and temporal boundaries. The story begins as my grandmother and I are driving across the Manhattan Bridge.

The year is 1987. A beat-up, white Chevy enters the Manhattan Bridge in the rain one afternoon. From behind, you see two heads: the short, black hair of a man in his twenties in the driver's seat and the slight figure of an elderly woman with puffy brown hair. Her body barely protrudes up from the passenger's seat. As they ride over a continuous beat of potholes, their heads shake: the black head and the little brown head. The man's hands tremble against the steering wheel. The five inches of red strips that race across the top of the white Camaro are but a blur to the other drivers. The few cars on the bridge, some just a few inches away from the Camaro, are barely visible. The subway tracks to the left are mysteriously silent. Empty tracks, puddles, potholes, and unsteady hands.

A wrinkled hand pulls down the visor and looks into the vanity mirror. A nervous smile opens to discolored teeth outlined in red. She then raises her right hand to her powdered forehead and begins to make the sign of the cross with the rhythm of the bridge. She whispers, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." She is wearing a hairnet over the top of her head. The seatbelt holds her body in place, but it is not a perfect fit.

As they leave the bridge, the rain begins to stop. There is a red light at the end of this ride. The Camaro splashes onto the potholed Bowery. Chinese signs come into focus

as they pull up to a red light. A man, around 40, in green pants and a green shirt rushes across traffic and plants a dirty rag in the center of the windshield. The locks are down. The light turns green and the car turns left on Houston Street, then right on Ridge Street, and then left on Clinton Street, past a Spanish restaurant. The car stops in front of a flower shop. The old woman makes the sign of the cross again.

My grandmother's compassion still strikes me as remarkable. After all, my father had spent some years in prison for crimes he had committed against her and my grandfather. For a brief moment, on this rainy day, we assembled on the wet pavement of Clinton Street, in front of a flower shop. With some prodding, my grandmother told my father, only recently released from prison and without a home, that he could come live with us in Brooklyn if—the big “if”—he stopped drinking and entered a detox program. As she spoke these words, my father grew teary-eyed. He said thank you. But there were no hugs, no promises, just an acknowledgement of the gesture, before my grandmother and I headed back to Brooklyn.

Two years after our visit, my father developed cirrhosis of the liver and was hospitalized at Bellevue. I remember visiting him one night at the hospital and working on my honors thesis in the waiting room. There, I remember reading Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and considering how photography could function as evidence, how history might be erased without an artifact of proof. My thesis topic, photography as a theme and metaphor in literature, is ironic considering the role that photographs like those that appear in this chapter have played in my own memory and narrative. My father would die in the hospital, close to my birthday, in February 1989.

Writing this story, reflecting on these memories, was of course a therapeutic act, but this story was also one that I carried with me as I entered the prison as a writing teacher and researcher who had been influenced by a host of literacy researchers, many of whom had taken a critical stance regarding notions of literacy and possibility.



Figure 2: My grandmother in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, circa 1987.

While working with Dr. Digby, I revised my story about my grandmother again and again and, in doing so, developed skills as a writer. Perhaps more importantly, though, I began to recognize the work of narrative to heal, to honor, and to teach.

The stories in this chapter demonstrate acts of world- and self-making through literate practice, albeit through complex reinterpretations of past histories and future hopes. By juxtaposing the narratives of students and myself with one another, as well as against the larger cultural narratives about literacy, I have attempted to demonstrate an approach—methodologically and pedagogically—for working with students and understanding their hopes and beliefs about the power of reading and writing. If, as Torre and Fine and others contend, education can transform the lives of prisoners and reduce crime as well as taxes levied to build and maintain prisons, we need to ask ourselves how to negotiate the space between hope and critique (589). While we must challenge naïve claims about literacy's power, we should not underestimate the modest and not-so-modest ways in which writing changes lives, those of both teachers and students. Teaching writing at the prison has helped me recognize the promise of teaching literacy and writing. In the end, we might say that it is not literacy per se that brings change, but the substance of the narratives that arise from it and their potential to make and remake worlds.

Notes

³⁶ All students' names are pseudonyms.

³⁷ For a discussion of the multiple definitions of literacy, see Vincent; and Wysocki and Johnson-Eilola.

³⁸ For a rich discussion of issues of the personal in qualitative research, see Alsup, "Protean Subjectivities: Qualitative Research and the Inclusion of the Personal"; Brooke and Hogg; and Mortensen and Kirsch.

³⁹ Two examples of college readers that include sections on literacy narratives are Belasco and Bishop.

⁴⁰ In 2010, Baca and Releah Cossett Lent published *Adolescents on the Edge: Stories and Lessons to Transform Learning*, which features the following cover blurb: "I paced my cell with a book in one hand and a knife under my mattress. I knew I could have a long and happy life with a book in my hand or I could have a miserable and short life with the shank that was in the mattress."

⁴¹ "[T]he fact that the relationships among Americans are established along economic lines" leads Stuckey to ask, "Would it not be logical then that literacy conforms also to these lines? (57)" Rather than a liberator, as discussed in earlier chapters, Stuckey views literacy as a violent system of control.

⁴² In *Community Literacy and the Rhetoric of Public Engagement*, Linda Flower similarly suggests the need to extend the work beyond critique: "The effort to discover and describe, to enact and revise what a *transformative more* could be, is one of the most energetically exploratory agendas to emerge in our field" (1).

⁴³ Robert Yagelski and Kirk Branch have also written about their experiences teaching in prison: Yagelski in *Literacy Matters* and Branch in *Eyes on the Ought to Be*.

⁴⁴ Angela Davis is often associated with the term the *prison-industrial complex*. In fact, as she herself points out, it was first used by Mike Davis in a 1995 article in *The Nation* entitled “A Prison-Industrial Complex: Hell Factories in the Field.” See *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*, Ed Joy James (325).

⁴⁵ See Morson and Emerson’s discussion of the *adventure novel of everyday life*, particularly of how this chronotope fuses everyday notions of time with adventure time (384-87). They write, “Conceiving change in terms of metamorphosis involves the following fundamental assumptions: (1) Change is real; identity is not static as it is in the Greek romance. (2) The time and changes of metamorphosis are irreversible, by contrast to the sequence of changes within a Greek romance or some other forms that may be reordered or expanded indefinitely. (3) Most important, the course of change is understood in a very specific way” (385).

⁴⁶ Drawing on geographic and discursive constructions of space (Bhabha; and Soja), Anita Wilson and other literacy researchers (see, for example, Leander and Sheehy; Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo, and Collazo; and Reynolds) explore the remaking of social space across a variety of institutional settings.

⁴⁷ See also Caroline Heller’s *Until We are Strong Together: Women Writers in the Tenderloin* for a similar sentiment. She writes, “In our increasingly desperate turnings to terms like critical literacy and liberation education in the search for a panacea for so much that is wrong with public education, we talk too little about the yearning we all

have—particularly those of us characteristically overlooked in the grand biography of American life—for witnesses” (20).

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have explored how teachers and theorists construct their own narratives of social mobility, possibility, and literacy. I have argued that the professional literature needs to address more fully how teachers' and theorists' personal histories with literacy shape what they see as possible (and desirable) for students, especially those from marginalized communities.

Based on material explored in each of the five chapters, I offer four concluding observations that address what I see as the central issues and implications of the study. Given the varied representations and methods included in this dissertation, this conclusion will further explicate the potential contributions of this research and the potential for the use of literacy narratives in studies of literacy.

Observation #1: Literacy narratives give theory "flesh and breath."

"But we cannot move theory into action unless we can find it in the eccentric and wandering ways of our daily life. I have written the stories that follow to give theory flesh and breath"

—Minnie Bruce Pratt, *s/he* (22)

In *s/he*, Minnie Bruce Pratt turns to writing stories to find theory in life (22). She remembers reading theories about women and oppression and finding that they did not adequately explain her own experiences. In the context of literacy research, Pratt's

assessment is important because it suggests the need to look beyond the theories alone and into the varied ways in which they connect or do not connect with lived experience. Moreover, it reminds us that stories do not need to align with theories, nor do they need to prove theories; sometimes, in fact, they can even challenge or extend theories in unexpected ways.

Writing teachers encounter considerable pressure to align their curricula with one or another theory of literacy, which has the effect of negating the authority of knowledge about literacy gleaned from their experiences as readers and writers. There is much to be gained by finding ways of articulating theories of literacy that encompass, or are at least supplemented by, teachers' knowledge of reading and writing as expressed in personal narratives of literacy.

Teachers' literacy narratives, in fact, provide an opportunity to explore stories that push the limits of theoretical accounts of literacy. It is in these "flesh and breath" narratives that we see how, often, theories fail to align with everyday life. We see this in the stories of the preservice teachers, in chapter 2, in which they recounted their journeys through school; how they learned to write, often very well; and the great investments their parents made in their education and, by extension, in their literacy development, and yet their ideas on pedagogy were complicated by their disbelief in pedagogies that did not conform to dominant narratives about teaching and the necessity of a skill-based curriculum. For example, Christine and Alice were unsure if Atwell's methods could work for them in teaching in marginalized communities because Atwell's ideas differed so radically from their own experiences with teachers, and more importantly, from their own experiences as writers. They were mindful of the social and economic challenges

that could make teaching in schools in disadvantaged communities so difficult, and they could not believe that Atwell's pedagogy could mitigate such challenges. Their critical eye made them view teaching as less joyful and empowering than what Atwell conveyed in *In the Middle*.

Making a space where teachers can reflect on pedagogical theories and connect them to their own learning is critically important. Without it, we may very well lose the potential to acknowledge and discuss possible tensions. By making such a space, we do not abandon or hide the tension, but instead foreground it. The intersection of narratives—the place where alternative views meet—provided the richest opportunity for the teachers in this study to reflect on their own histories and those of others. Christine, one of the preservice teachers, remembered how her family had stressed education, and how she had cultivated habits that led to her getting As all the time. With varying levels of detail, she and other teachers in this study presented stories in which literacy was consequential in some way. Yet the teachers, mostly middle class, were less inclined to see this potential as applicable to students from poorer communities, a finding that I had not anticipated.⁴⁸ Through the interweaving of literacy narratives and classroom discussion, it is possible to better understand not only why the preservice teachers disagreed with Atwell's pedagogy, but also how their own experiences with literacy and schooling might have shaped their understanding of pedagogical practice.

In Horton's and Freire's reconsideration of their ways of knowing, we see a tension between theorist and theory—and the need for a more fluid way of understanding theoretical knowledge. The spoken book provided a venue for the theorists to reflect on their theories and their own literacy and teaching autobiographies. Through their stories,

we are able to see the great value that their families placed on literacy, the educators' epic journeys to school, and their struggles to obtain literacy, which intensified their later commitment to helping others who were being denied access to literacy while they were simultaneously imagining their particular versions of critical literacy.

Literacy narratives are especially important when they help us understand how competing views can coexist. Juan, one of the incarcerated students in chapter 5, knew that he might end up "flipping burgers," and realistically, I could not assure him that he could go beyond this if only he learned to write better. Yet he continued to try to write for change, most forcefully by composing and presenting a proposal for a bilingual Language Partners program at the prison in which he was incarcerated, a need that he had identified through his research over the semester. After a symposium presented before community members and prison administrators, Juan's proposal was accepted, and his suggestions were implemented at the prison. Sometimes, as Juan's story suggests, the theoretical claims of crisis or myth do not fully connect with the life experiences of students or that of their teacher.

In bringing together the narratives from several chapters, my aim has been to show the striking ways in which literacy narratives illuminate and challenge any singular theoretical stance on literacy and its affordances. On one of my recent visits to the prison, Juan thanked me for, as he described it, "pushing him" to complete his proposal. He saw the Language Partners program as a success, something in which he took pride, while nevertheless recognizing the obstacles for employment that would await him once he was released. Theories alone tend not to get at this level of complexity. It is through Juan's literacy narrative—and the others in this study—that we begin to see the tension between

hope and critique, between recognizing the limitations of literacy and yet still maintaining a sense of possibility.

Observation #2: Triumphant stories about literacy are not necessarily a problem.

At around the same time that Myles Horton was speaking a book with Paulo Freire, he was giving a literacy workshop at the University of Tennessee to a group of teachers who were drawn to his story and the successes of Highlander Folk School. At one point, Horton asked a group of literacy teachers, “Is there a way that we can avoid duplicating our ineffective methods?” On the recording of the workshop, there was silence. As I continued listening to this archival audio,⁴⁹ I realized that Horton and the group had watched a movie earlier that day showing past teachers at work. Although its title was not given, Horton suggested that the film depicted less-than-positive images of teaching. He then posed this question to the group:

Was there any striking difference in... something we could see from the pictures and all.... If someone...made a movie of your teaching literacy, would it look like that? (Highlander archives)

When one teacher spoke up about how literacy teaching *should* be, Horton attempted to get the teacher and the group to first consider their current positions and practices as teachers. He then reasoned that he could take them to Highlander and point out photographs of its legendary teachers, such as Bernice Robinson, who taught the school’s first citizenship classes in 1956, but that this would not be especially helpful unless teachers first began from their current location. “You could never get over there if you

started where I am,” Horton continued. “You have to start where you are...” (Highlander archives).

For any teacher, the projection of one’s teaching—and, more broadly, one’s experiences with literacy—can be intimidating given the numerous other “movies” that play in popular forums and surface in the professional literature. Not everyone can be a Horton, an Atwell, a Rose, or a Freire, yet stories of educators like them tend to garner a large and interested readership.

In the media, such literacy stories are often linked, directly or indirectly, to moments of transformation in the lives of students and, occasionally, teachers. Typically, the students come from troubled and poor neighborhoods, are students of color, and are supported by a savior teacher who is often a white teacher. The problems with such narratives are obvious (see discussion of Reed’s response to *Precious* in chapter 1). Still, these popular accounts share some similarities with scholarly accounts that feature teachers who are tirelessly working to make a difference in students’ lives.

Interestingly, educators sometimes think their own stories are less than heroic—more “real,” so to speak. In the preface to her 2009 book *Teaching Hope*, Erin Gruwell writes:

Like so many idealistic college students who watched movies about education, I suppose that I expected my students to stand on their desks and say, ‘Oh Captain, My Captain’ [sic], as the students did in *Dead Poets Society*, or to overcome all obstacles like Jaime Escalante’s students in *Stand and Deliver*.

Yet, even if Gruwell's intent is to offer a story that stands in contrast to these idealistic movies, for many readers her story is not remarkably different from those told in *Dead Poets Society* and *Stand and Deliver*, for example. I would argue that narratives such as Rose's, Horton's, and Freire's also reflect characteristics of the successful teaching narrative, a type of story that continually attracts praise and yet has inspired critique. I suggest that these stories will be read differently by different teachers, and that they cannot be simply labeled as "good" or "bad" narratives.

For some teachers, comparing themselves with successful and well-known literacy educators can be overwhelming. Sara, in chapter 3, for example, found Mike Rose's gutsy stance distant from her own image of herself as a teacher. Although her own work with disadvantaged groups, including incarcerated men, made me question her modesty, I saw through her response to Rose how a "successful" literacy story could give some teachers pause in that it could lead them to think that their own work was insignificant. Related to this, as Horton suggests, is the fact that heroic stories can redirect teachers away from their own practices. Even inspiring teaching stories like that of Bernice Robinson—or those of the teachers in this study—can distract teachers from looking at the distinctive ways in which their own pedagogies take shape.

In his analyses of storytelling, Jerome Bruner suggests that individuals draw on familiar patterns for representing experience, what he calls "recipes."⁵⁰ Reflecting on how stories make a life, Bruner discusses how, through repetition, stories gain force and create reality:

I believe the ways of telling and ways of conceptualizing that go with them become so habitual that they finally become recipes for structuring

experience itself, for laying down routes in memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present, but directing it in the future. I have argued that a life as led is inseparable from a life as told—or more bluntly, a life is not ‘how it was’ but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted.” (“Life as Narrative” 36)

Bruner’s observation suggests both how individuals develop patterns for representing narratives and how cultural narratives can influence the recipe, becoming grand narratives of literacy, as Beth Daniell contends. Teachers’ responses to such narratives are not predetermined, but rather are shaped by a multitude of factors including their own literacy narratives and experiences teaching.

Observation #3:

Hope/critique and myth/possibility are not mutually exclusive.

A central focus of this dissertation has been on how teachers and theorists attempt to resolve a paradox they are likely to encounter in narratives about literacy. On one hand, they are immersed in a popular culture that cherishes narrative links between literacy and economic advancement (and, further, between such advancement and a “good life”). On the other hand, in professional discourse and in teacher preparation courses, they are likely to encounter narratives that complicate an assumed causal relationship between literacy and economic progress.

While powerful cultural rhetorics of upward social mobility often neutralize the critical potential of teachers’ own narratives of literacy—potential that has been documented by scholars in writing studies and allied disciplines—this is not always the

case. The chapters in this dissertation offer evidence that hopeful and critical positions on the transformational possibilities of literacy are not mutually exclusive.

This study brings together two perspectives on literacy and possibility that are rarely merged: the first is literacy as myth, or “the literacy myth,” and the second is critical literacy, a ubiquitous term that is a common catchword. Both perspectives attempt to answer the question, “*What can literacy really do?*”—a big question, and one with many answers.

In bringing together the mythic and the critical, I have attempted to bring to light a contradictory rhetoric in literacy research, one that oscillates between hope and critique. I argue that acknowledging the tension between these perspectives—indeed, embracing it—is a necessary requirement for advancement of the field of literacy studies, for qualitative analysis, and for explorations of literate practice. Harvey Graff’s landmark work *The Literacy Myth* provided an invaluable corrective to those who subscribe to a rigid link between literacy and upward mobility. Over the years, Graff has shown the difficulty (perhaps, the impossibility) of making such claims about literacy with any degree of certainty. Because of the numerous definitions of literacy, it is increasingly difficult to draw boundaries as to what counts as literacy, what counts as a literacy narrative, and most importantly, what counts as a literacy myth.

In 2010, Graff published *Literacy Myths, Legacies, and Lessons*, in which he reflects on the pervasive belief that literacy, and literacy alone, will make the world better. He writes:

To conclude, I return to a powerful statement by Johan Galtung that I first quoted in the 1970s: ‘What would happen if the whole world became

literate? Answer: not so very much, for the world is by and large structured in such a way that it is capable of absorbing the impact. But if the whole world consisted of literate, autonomous, critical, constructive people, capable of translating ideas into action, individually or collectively—the world would change.’

Do we want the world to change? (*Literacy Myths* 31)

As I went back to Galtung’s essay, I saw that along with his critique, he was actually arguing for a version of critical literacy. In fact, in a footnote, he cited Freire and the important work that Freire did. This passage illustrates the slippery nature of the term “literacy,” all the more complicated for our current time, in which digital literacy plays a prominent role in cultivated notions of critical literacy. I contend that this makes identifying literacy myths all the more complicated: If literacy is always situated, our myths are situated as well.

I believe that liberatory pedagogies such as Horton’s, Freire’s, and Rose’s must confront literacy myths because both hinge on a faith in literacy’s ability to transform lives. This inevitably brings us back to issues of the multiple definitions of literacy. Can we really separate literacy from attitudes, values, norms, and beliefs without reducing it to a decontextualized skill such as the ability to inscribe (or read) characters? I would suggest, along with other scholars who study literacy practices, that literacy and the elements that surround it cannot easily be pulled apart. It is in these contextual details—teachers’ everyday stories and memoirs—that we can glimpse the multiple and

complicated ways in which literacy myths can surface even in the work of our most critical educators.

Through acknowledging the numerous paradoxes faced by literacy educators, we can potentially develop richer training programs that allow space for teachers to discuss and share the competing and conflicting narratives of literacy that underlie their teaching practices. Such work can highlight the particular ways in which stories about literacy, even mythological ones, are enacted in real contexts. I believe that such research is necessary to expand scholarly and public discussions beyond rhetorics that too easily carve up literacy in terms of crisis and myth.

Observation #4:

In locations of extreme hardship, literacy can assume greater consequence.

While teaching in prison, I realized how higher education could matter; this was not debatable for most of the incarcerated students I taught, including Frank, who was bothered by readings that questioned literacy's power. After reading an excerpt from Robert Yagelski's account of his experiences teaching in prison, Frank questioned the theoretical framework that challenged literacy's power. For him, "writing for a change" was not a catchy title, but a reality. In an essay, "Shimmers of Light," he describes an act of writing that earned him a reduced sentence and helped him renew his relationship with his family. I am quoting it at length here because I believe it illustrates one paradox of literacy education that is tied to social class and access, and captures how stories of hardship often link up with the power of literacy:

I knew that there was nothing I could write that would excuse what I had done, writing that speech just felt like something I had to do. When I saw my lawyer, I gave him what I had written, and after reading it he asked if he could show it to the prosecutor. I consented, and a few days later met with both of them, but this time something was different between us. It seemed now they talked to me like a person, and although the prosecutor had initially argued I should receive the maximum sentence possible, after reading my speech he saw in me something more than the sum of my mistakes. He asked if I would be willing to read my speech in front of a camera, and of course I said I would. He then got permission to have a video recorder brought into the jail so he could tape me as I delivered my speech. As I looked into that camera, I imagined standing in front of kids who I may not know personally, but whom I could talk to in a familiar voice, as a kid who knows what it's like to be faced with making tough decisions. But I also spoke with the gravity of a young man who had to suffer some serious consequences for his actions, consequences that would be with me the rest of my life.

When I composed my speech, my future did not look very bright at all, nevertheless, through writing it I was able to find a spark inside of me to want something more for my life. I was able to reconnect with my family, whom I had almost lost touch with, and I set a good example for my brother and sister again. I remember during my sentencing both my mom and grandma cried a lot, and every time I see either one of them cry I

can't stop myself from crying too, but when they saw my video, their tears were from pride—because old Frank was finally back again, and we all didn't mind shedding a tear for that. In the small town where I grew up, my former sixth grade teacher heard about my case from the newspapers and wanted to attend my sentencing because she remembered me as a good student. After seeing my video, she thought her students would benefit from hearing my speech, and she asked the prosecutor if she could have a copy made for that purpose. To this day she still shows her kids my video, and sometimes they even write me short letters telling me that they heard what I had to say, and that they learned something from it. That is how powerful *writing for a change* can be. The words I wrote over fifteen years ago are still helping kids avoid making some of the mistakes I once made.

As I read Frank's words, I was mindful of Rose's remarks about the investments that students, particularly working-class students, can make in literacy and schooling. "It is a very iffy thing, this schooling," Rose writes to describe the stock that students place in the power of education (and literacy) (215). Frank, like the other students in Project Justice, saw writing as a way to get somewhere else and as a way to remake himself.

While not underestimating the formidable obstacles facing those aligned with social justice initiatives, I am mindful of how rhetorics of possibility sometimes get configured in social justice efforts. This has certainly proven true in my qualitative analyses of teaching writing in the context of a men's prison and in the pedagogies of possibility that follow when communities are given voice. While we must challenge

naïve claims about literacy's power, we should not underestimate the modest and not-so-modest ways in which writing changes the lives of both teachers and students. In 2009, I was a presenter on a keynote panel with Harvey Graff. As I was looking at the upcoming schedule for the Literacy Studies program at Ohio State, I noticed that Ira Shor had just presented a paper entitled, "Can Critical Literacy Change the World?" Intrigued by this title, I asked Graff, "What was Shor's answer?" Graff's response was, "Sometimes."

"Sometimes" is not good enough. Yet it is all we have at the moment, and because of the situated nature of literacy, it is all we will likely ever have. Still, we need to articulate possibilities with regard to literacy—personal, social, and sometimes economic possibilities that can become realities through collective effort, reflection, and a critical hope.

Notes

⁴⁸ In some ways, the preservice teachers' response seemed to support Lisa Delpit's view that schools must provide the content—the skills—that marginalized students lack. Yet some might argue that Atwell's pedagogy accomplishes the very same work with an alternative approach.

⁴⁹ I first heard an audio recording of this meeting in the archives at the Wisconsin Historical Society in the summer of 2008.

⁵⁰ Bakhtin puts forth this idea, too, in his use of the term *chronotopes*, as discussed in chapters 4 and 5.

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"Beyond Hope: Rhetorics of Mobility, Possibility, and Literacy"

When writing teachers enter the classroom, they frequently bring with them a deep faith in the power of literacy to rectify social inequalities by improving their students' social and economic standing. It is this faith, this hope for change, that draws some writing teachers to locations of intense social and economic hardship. I argue that while powerful cultural rhetorics of upward social mobility often neutralize the critical potential of teachers' own narratives of literacy—potential that has been documented by scholars in writing studies and allied disciplines—this is not always the case. In chapters that analyze diverse literacy narratives and the writing pedagogies they influence, I demonstrate through qualitative analysis and narrative inquiry that hopeful and critical positions on the transformational possibilities of literacy are *not*, as is commonly asserted, mutually exclusive.

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Transnational Literate Lives in Digital Times, with Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia L. Selfe. Logan, UT: Computers and Composition Digital Press/Utah State University Press, 2011.
Forthcoming.

"Moving Images of Literacy in a Transnational World," with Gail E. Hawisher, Hannah Kyung Lee, Cynthia L. Selfe, and Synne Skjulstad. *Computers and Composition Online* (Fall 2010/Spring 2011): <http://www.bgsu.edu/cconline/digitalcomposing/>.

"Sustaining Scholarly Efforts: Balancing Tradition and Change," with Cynthia L. Selfe and Gail E. Hawisher. *Technological Ecologies and Sustainability*. Ed. Dànielle N. DeVoss, Heidi A. McKee, and Richard Selfe. Logan, UT: Computers and Composition Digital Press/Utah State University Press, 2009. <http://ccdigitalpress.org/ebooks-and-projects/tes>.

"Ubiquitous Writing and Learning: Digital Media as Tools for Reflection and Research on Literate Activity," with Gail E. Hawisher, Paul Prior, Amber Buck, Steven E. Gump, Cory Holding, Hannah Lee, Christa Olson, and Janine Solberg. *Ubiquitous Learning*. Ed. Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. 254-64.

"Critical Remediation: Locating Eliza." *Kairos: Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy* 11 (2007): <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/11.3/index.html>.

"Re-situating and Re-mediating the Canons: A Cultural-Historical Remapping of Rhetorical Activity," with Paul Prior, Janine Solberg, Hannah Bellwoar, Bill Chewning, Karen Lunsford, Liz Rohan, Kevin Roozen, Mary Sheridan-Rabideau, Jody Shipka, Derek Van Ittersum, and Joyce Walker. *Kairos: Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy* 11 (2007): <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/11.3/index.html>.

"Teachers, Capitalists, and Class in *Pygmalion* and *The Millionairess*." *The Independent Shavian* 42.3 (2004): 62-70.

TEACHING

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Informatics 303: [Writing Across Media](#), Fall 2010 and Spring 2011

Supported development of course exploring composition with sound, images, animation, and other media, while reconsidering theoretical perspectives on conventional rhetorical concepts such as authorship, audience, process, revision, and design.

University of Illinois Writing Project, Summer 2008, Summer 2009, and Summer 2010

Taught community teachers how to compose and teach with digital media in university-sponsored Summer Institute.

English 482: [Writing Technologies](#), Spring 2010

Explored historical and theoretical accounts of writing as a material practice that is shaped by technology.

English 380: Writing for a Change: For Business, for Life, Spring 2009

Designed and taught upper-level writing course that brought together writing process pedagogy with professional writing at a medium-high security prison.

Tutor & Workshop Leader, Education Justice Project, Spring 2009-Spring 2010

Provided writing support to incarcerated students at a community prison.

English 481: Writing Theory and Pedagogy, Fall 2008

Teaching Assistant for Gail E. Hawisher

Worked with preservice teachers on how to compose with digital media.

Writing Across the Curriculum Seminar for Teaching Assistants, Spring 2006-Fall 2009

Assisted in the design and teaching of three-day workshop for teaching assistants across campus.

English 402: Descriptive English Grammar, Spring 2007 and Fall 2007

Teaching Assistant for Gail E. Hawisher

Communications Workshop

Mid-America Earthquake Center, Spring 2006 and Summer 2007

Designed and co-taught (with Janine Solberg) two-day workshop for undergraduate research assistantship winners.

English 505: Writing Studies 1, Social Contexts and Functions of Writing, Fall 2006

Lab Assistant for Gail E. Hawisher

Instructed graduate students on how to create web portfolios and use video editing tools.

BTW 275: Writing Across Media, Fall 2005

Developed advanced professional writing course, since adapted for the Illinois Informatics Institute, integrating new media theory with multimedia composing.

BTW 250: Introduction to Professional Writing: Fall 2004, Spring 2005

Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD

Crafting the Essay, Center for Gifted and Talented Youth, Summer 2008

Taught intensive web-based course to students in grades 7-12 on ways of using the personal essay to explore narration, description, and reflection.

The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH

Digital Media Specialist, Digital Media and Composition, Summer 2007

Assisted rhetoric and composition scholars in exploring effective uses of digital media in college composition classrooms.

City University of New York, Brooklyn College

CORE 6: Introduction to World Literature, Fall 1999

ENG 1: Composition 1, Spring 1998

ENG 4: Basic Writing, Fall 1998

New York University, School of Continuing and Professional Studies (SCPS), New York, NY

Magazine Production and Manufacturing: Fall 1998, Spring 1999, Summer 1999

Designed course offering comprehensive study of magazine production from prepress to press.

RESEARCH & TEACHING INTERESTS

literacy studies	qualitative research methods	transnational literacies
computers and writing	professional writing and publishing	CHAT theory
teacher education	histories of rhetoric and composition	higher education in prison

FELLOWSHIPS, AWARDS & DISTINCTIONS

Fellowship, Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Advanced Collaboratory (HASTAC)
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2009-2010 and 2010-2011
Awarded for innovative work across the areas of technology, the arts, the humanities, and the social sciences.

Fellowship, English Department
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2008-2009 and 2009-2010

Campus List of Instructors Ranked Excellent by the Students
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Fall 2005 and Spring 2009

Computer and Composition's Michelle Kendrick Award for Outstanding Digital Production/Scholarship 2008 Award received for *Kairos* publication "Re-situating and Re-mediating the Canons: A Cultural-Historical Remapping of Rhetorical Activity: A Collaborative Webtext," 2007.

Fellowship, Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2008-2009
Supported interdisciplinary dissertation research on teachers' literacy narratives.

Summer Humanities Fellowship
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Summer 2008
Conducted archival research on Myles Horton and Paulo Freire's spoken book at the Wisconsin Historical Society.

Scholarship, "Popular Education and Organizing Workshop"
Highlander Research and Education Center, December 2008

Reading Group Award, Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2006-2007 and 2007-2008
With Gail E. Hawisher, facilitated cross-campus reading group and lecture series around the theme of digital literacies. Continued group with Hawisher and Amber Buck, 2008-2011.

Scholarship, Center for Working-Class Studies, "Teaching Immigration Across the Disciplines"
Youngstown University, Youngstown, OH, June 2007
Competitive tuition and housing scholarship awarded in conjunction with the Ohio Humanities Council for summer workshop on teaching immigration across the disciplines.

Passed Special Preliminary Exam with Distinction, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, May 2007.

Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory Conference Travel Award
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Spring 2007, Spring 2008

Center for Writing Studies Conference Fellowship
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2005-2010

English Department Conference Travel Award
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Fall 2006, Fall 2007, and Fall 2008

English Department Recruitment Fellowship
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Summer 2005

Scholarship, Institute for Writing and Thinking
Bard College, Summer 2004
Competitive tuition waiver for participation in summer workshop, "Thinking Through Narrative."

CONFERENCE PAPERS & INVITED PRESENTATIONS

"Literacy Narratives and Prison Relations." Conference on College Composition and Communication, Atlanta, GA. March 2011.

"Time and Doing Time with Literacy Narratives." Modern Language Association Convention. Los Angeles, CA. January 2011.

"More Than Words: Prison Matters and Materials." National Council of Teachers of English. Orlando, FL. November 2010.

"Writing for a Change, Writing for Chip." Chip Bruce: A Celebration of His Once and Future Work. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, IL. September 2010. Invited.

"Virtual-less Home: Online Compositions from Prison." Computers and Writing. Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN. May 2010.

"Reading, Writing, and Recidivism: Rhetorics of Literacy in the Prison Classroom." Rhetoric Society of America Biennial Conference, Minneapolis, MN. May 2010.

"Prison Business: A Contextual Approach to Teaching Professional Writing." Association of Teachers of Technical Writing, Louisville, KY. March 2010.

"Literacy Promises: Teachers, Composition, and the Prison." Qualitative Research Network, Conference on College Composition and Communication, Louisville, KY. March 2010.

"The Ubiquitous *Road*: Horton and Freire's 'Spoken Book.'" Computers and Writing. University of California, Davis. June 2009.

"The Road Less Traveled: Horton and Freire on the Edge of the Literacy Narrative." The International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. May 2009.

"Teachers' Memoirs: Confronting Literacy Myths." Keynote talk, with Harvey Graff. Expanding Literacy Studies Conference. The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH. April 2009. Invited.

"Making Teachers, Making Literacies Across Modalities." Thomas R. Watson Conference on Rhetoric and Composition, Louisville, KY. October 2008.

"Resituating the Literacy Myth." Conference on College Composition and Communication, New Orleans, LA. March 2008.

"Teacher Making and Literacy Narratives as Methodology." Writing Research Across Borders. University of California, Santa Barbara. February 2008.

"Revisiting *Lives on the Boundary*." Conference on College Composition and Communication, New York, NY. March 2007.

"Professional Writing and Social Class." Working-Class Studies Special Interest Group. Conference on College Composition and Communication, New York, NY. March 2007.

"Into and Out of Theory: Freire and Horton's 'Spoken Book.'" Thomas R. Watson Conference on Rhetoric and Composition, Louisville, KY. October 2006.

"Replaying and Remixing Narratives of 'Old' Media." Conference on Computers and Writing. Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX. May 2006.

"Narrating Literacy: Reading Professors' Autobiographies." Qualitative Research Network. Conference on College Composition and Communication, Chicago, IL. March 2006.

"Technological 'Corruption' and the Myth of Female Authenticity." Feminism(s) and Rhetoric(s) Conference. Michigan Technological University, Houghton, MI. October 2005.

SELECT COAUTHORED PRESENTATIONS

"Exploring Digital Portfolios and Digital Literacy in the Invitational Summer Institute," with Libbie Morley. National Writing Project, 2010 Annual Meeting. Orlando, FL. November 2010. Invited.

"(re)voicing teaching and learning in Paseo Boricua," with Alexandra Cavallaro. Community as Intellectual Space Conference. Chicago, IL. June 2009.

“Computers and Composition Digital Press (CCDP): An Emerging Publishing Venue,” with Gail E. Hawisher and Cynthia L. Selfe. Computers and Writing Conference. University of Georgia, Athens, GA. May 2008.

“Who Matters: (re)figuring Accounts of Literacy,” with Jody Shipka. Computers and Writing. Wayne State University, Detroit, MI. May 2007.

“Re-designing Digital Literacies in the 21st Century,” with Gail E. Hawisher, Maria Lovett, Shafinaz Ahmed, Sophie Dewayani, Yu Kyung Kang, and Vanessa Rouillon. Conference on College Composition and Communication, New York, NY. March 2007.

“Supporting Digital Media and Research Across the Curriculum,” with Gail E. Hawisher and Synne Skjulstad. Invited paper. Illinois Wesleyan University, Bloomington, IL. February 2007.

“Triptych Discussion,” with Sibylle Gruber, Gail E. Hawisher, Janice R. Walker, and Joyce R. Walker. Invited presentation. Computers and Writing Online Conference. AcadianaMOO. February 2007.

“Open Source Teaching: Narratives of Play and Inquiry in Professional Writing,” with Rebecca Bilbro. English Articulation Conference. Allerton Park Conference Center, Monticello, IL. April 2006.

“Alternative Text(s): A Multi-Theoried Approach to Teaching Professional Writing,” with Hannah Bellwoar and Janine Solberg. Association for Teachers of Technical Writing, Chicago, IL. March 2006.

ADMINISTRATION & SERVICE

Technology Liaison, University of Illinois Writing Project, Urbana, IL
Summer 2009, Summer 2010, and Summer 2011

Writing Across Media Steering Committee
Summer 2008-Spring 2011

Steering Committee, University of Illinois Writing Project, Urbana, IL
Fall 2007-Summer 2011

Research Assistant to Peter Mortensen
Fall 2006-Spring 2011

Academic Team, Education Justice Project, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Spring 2009-Spring 2010

Program Committee, Expanding Literacy Studies Conference, The Ohio State University
2008-2009

Web Redesign Task Force Committee, Department of English, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Fall 2007-Spring 2009

Assistant Director, Center for Writing Studies, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Spring 2006-Spring 2008

Program Coordinator, Programs in Professional Writing, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Fall 2005-Spring 2006

Programs in Professional Writing, Textbook Committee, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Spring 2005

Reader, CUNY Writing Assessment Test, City University of New York, Brooklyn College
Spring 1998

EDITORIAL & PUBLISHING EXPERIENCE

Research in the Teaching of English

Guest Reviewer, October 2009

Computers and Composition

Associate Editor, 2006-2009

College Composition and Communication

Assistant Editor, 2005-2006

The Independent Shavian, New York, NY

Associate Editor, 1998-2007

Hearst Communications, New York, NY

Assistant Managing Editor, 2003-2004

Editorial Production Director, 1999-2002

Operations Supervisor, 1997-1999

Advertising Production Manager, 1995-1997

Assistant Advertising Production Manager, 1993-1995

Sales Associate, 1991-1993

Assistant to the Managing Editor, 1990-1991

MEDIA & DESIGN PROJECTS

Editorial Design Associate, Computers and Composition Digital Press, June 2007-Present:
<http://ccdigitalpress.org>

Video Documentary, "(re)voicing teaching and learning in Paseo Boricua," with Alexandra Cavallaro: <http://patrickberry.com/revoicing.mov>

Video Documentary, "Rick Bats: Coffee, Goth Culture & the Life of a DJ":

<http://patrickberry.com/rickbats.mov>

"Multimodality in 60 seconds," featured on the Digital Media Project at Ohio State University:

<http://dmp.osu.edu>

TECHNOLOGY & DESIGN SKILLS

Web design: Dreamweaver, Flash, SeaMonkey

Desktop publishing: InDesign, QuarkXPress, PageMaker

Digital audio/video: Audacity, GarageBand, iMovie, Final Cut Pro

Graphics: Photoshop, Illustrator, iPhoto

Content Management Systems: Blackboard, Illinois Compass, Moodle, iLabs, Drupal

Blogging: WordPress, Moveable Type

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS & AFFILIATIONS

Association for the Teaching of Technical Writing

Conference on College Composition and Communication

Education Justice Project, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Modern Language Association

National Council of Teachers of English

National Writing Project

Rhetoric Society of America

Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

University of Illinois Writing Project, Urbana-Champaign

Youth Community Informatics, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

REFERENCES

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The Ohio State University
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